

**AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY, GENDER RELATIONS, AND FAMILY SYSTEMS  
THEORY: DIRECTIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING**

**A Dissertation  
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the Faculty of the  
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by  
Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele  
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*Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele*

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

*Faculty Committee*

*Barthelme G. Guder*  
*Chairperson*

*Kenneth B. Fickler*

*William M. Clements*

---

*5/3/02*  
*Date*

*John H. Finner*  
*Dean*

## **ABSTRACT**

**African Women's Theology, Gender Relations, and Family Systems Theory:**

**Directions for Pastoral Care and Counseling**

**Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele**

**This dissertation is concerned with the fact that no African pastoral theological work to date analyzes family systems theory, African families, the church, and pastoral theology utilizing African women's theological examination of gender relations and women's status in African societies.**

**Since African women theologians have noted that African women are oppressed by gender-based norms that marginalize them in family, church, and society, it is this dissertation's contention that pastors and pastoral counselors need to utilize gender analysis in pastoral caregiving. As such, they need a gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving paradigm that responds adequately to the vital areas of pastoral needs created by gender injustice.**

**A critical examination of family systems theory using African women's theological analysis of gender relations indicates that selected aspects of family systems theory and therapy are an effective framework and tool for responding adequately to gender problems identified by African women theologians.**

**The task of this dissertation is therefore threefold. First, this dissertation brings gender relations from the margins to the center of African pastoral theological concern and focus. Second, it examines major themes in African women's theology, highlighting the identified problems in gender relations. Third, this dissertation analyzes family systems theory showing, for example, how the Bowenian concept of the differentiation of**



**the self, the structural notion of clearly defined boundaries, and the contextual construct of relational justice can be used in the care for gender problems.**

**Maintaining that the triune God is the archetype of all healthy relationships and true human community, this dissertation proposes the theological image of perichoresis (the notion that describes relations of mutuality and reciprocity within the triune God), in conjunction with family systems theory and African women's theology, as an evocative image for gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling. Pastoral interventions based on this model promote gender consciousness and a new community in which there is no gender inequality; nor is there any colonization of woman by man, and vice versa. Such a perichoretic community fosters relationships without domination, subordination, or violence.**

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Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. My experience of community in these various settings, coupled with my formative experience of church life and work in my native Democratic Republic of Congo, has profoundly shaped my thinking and deepened my hope in the role of the church in bringing about personal and social change.

Further, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to teach family systems theory and therapy, while I was writing this dissertation, to Master of Arts in Counseling Ministries and Master of Divinity students at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio. The assumed relevance of family systems theory in addressing gender conflicts and other relationship problems received considerable testing as I taught the material.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
<b>1. Introduction and Overview . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Rationale of the Study . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Stating the Problem . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Statement of the Thesis and Outline of the Argument . . . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Definitions/Discussion of Terms . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Methodology . . . . .</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Scope and Limitations . . . . .</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Review of Closely Related Literature . . . . .</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Introduction of Major Theoretical Resources Used         in the Argument . . . . .</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Introductory Comments . . . . .</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Central Themes of African Women's Theology . . . . .</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Family Systems Theory: A Brief Analysis . . . . .</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Central Themes and Philosophical Commitments . . . . .</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Major Theoretical Orientations . . . . .</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Critiques of and Responses to Family Systems         Theory and African Women's Theology . . . . .</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Contribution of the Dissertation . . . . .</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter Outlines . . . . .</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>2. African Women's Theology: Gender Dynamics in the Family . . . . .</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Introduction and General Considerations . . . . .</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Gender Dynamics in the African Family and Society . . . . .</b>	<b>50</b>

Preliminary Remarks . . . . .	50
Recurring Themes . . . . .	51
Male Domination of Family Relations . . . . .	51
Cultural Expectations of Marriage and Motherhood . . . . .	53
Gender Factors in Women's Mental Health . . . . .	60
Unequal Distribution of Work in the Household . . . . .	63
Discrimination in Education and Economics . . . . .	69
Violence Against Women and the Issue of Women's Silence . . . . .	74
Neglect of Women's Individuality . . . . .	86
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	96
3. African Women's Theology: Gender Dynamics in Church and Theology . . . . .	98
Introduction . . . . .	98
Recurring Themes . . . . .	99
Women's Roles and Images in the African Church . . . . .	99
Dealing with Women's Pain and Suffering in the Church . . . . .	113
Women's Marginalization in Theological Education and Church Leadership . . . . .	120
The Neglect of Women's Issues in African Theology . . . . .	125
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	136
Critical Assessment of Some Aspects of African Women's Theology . .	137
4. Family Systems Theory and the Concerns of African Women Theologians . . . . .	147
Introduction . . . . .	147

<b>Bowenian Theory and Therapy . . . . .</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Theoretical Assumptions/General Observations . . . . .</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Basic Concepts . . . . .</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Differentiation of Self . . . . .</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Emotional Triangle . . . . .</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>Multigenerational Transmission . . . . .</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Emotional System . . . . .</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>Contextual Family Theory and Therapy . . . . .</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>General Considerations . . . . .</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Discussion of Basic Concepts . . . . .</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>Objectifiable Facts . . . . .</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>Individual Psychology or Needs . . . . .</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Systems of Transactional Patterns or Power Alignments . . . . .</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Relational ethics: The Balance of Fairness . . . . .</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>Summary . . . . .</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Structural Family Theory and Therapy . . . . .</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>General Observations . . . . .</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Characteristics and/or Concepts of         Structural Family Therapy . . . . .</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>Distribution of Power . . . . .</b>	<b>204</b>
<b>Flexibility and Boundaries . . . . .</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>Enmeshment and Disengagement . . . . .</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>The Role of the Structural Therapist . . . . .</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks . . . . .</b>	<b>214</b>

<b>5. Pastoral Theological Analysis: African Women's Theology and Family Systems Theory in Dialogue . . . . .</b>	<b>.215</b>
Introduction . . . . .	215
A Comparison of African Women's Theology and Family Systems Theory: A Pastoral Theological Reading . . . . .	.218
Perichoresis as a Theological Image for Gender-Sensitive Pastoral Care and Counseling . . . . .	238
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	.256
<b>6. Utilizing the Resources in Pastoral Care and Counseling: General Implications and the Story of Aliviza . . . . .</b>	<b>258</b>
Introduction . . . . .	258
Implications for the Life of the Church and the Communal Life . . . . .	258
Implications for the Practice of Pastoral Care and Counseling . . . . .	266
Case Illustration . . . . .	285
The Story of Aliviza . . . . .	.285
Preliminary Comments . . . . .	.286
Issues Raised in the Case . . . . .	.287
Aliviza in Her Marriage and Family . . . . .	290
Pastoral and Psychotherapeutic Interventions . . . . .	292
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	303
<b>7. Summary, Recommendations, and Areas for Further Research . . . . .</b>	<b>305</b>
Introduction . . . . .	.305
Summary . . . . .	305
Recommendations . . . . .	310
Concluding Remarks . . . . .	.330

<b>Areas for Further Research . . . . .</b>	<b>.332</b>
<b>Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>.336</b>



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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction and Overview

#### Rationale of the Study

##### Stating the Problem

There is a considerable amount of literature responding to and critiquing family systems theory from a variety of philosophical, psychological, cultural, ethnic, and feminist perspectives. Limited work has been done that engages family systems theory (its philosophical assumptions and presuppositions, values, and promises) from an African perspective. However, no pastoral theological literature to date studies family systems theory, African families, the church, and Christian pastoral theology and care utilizing African women's theological analysis of gender relations and women's status in African societies.<sup>1</sup>

This is a significant gap in the African pastoral theological literature. Several African pastoral theologians and practitioners of pastoral care and counseling such as Emmanuel Lartey, John Ghunney, and Masamba ma Mpolo have incorporated systems thinking in their work, suggesting its relevance to the African context.<sup>2</sup> I build on this

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<sup>1</sup> There are African women pastoral caregivers and counselors who have written on Christian/family care and counseling in contemporary Africa. They include Daisy Nwachuku, Wilhelmina Kalu, Vivian Msomi, and others. While these African women pastoral caregivers and counselors have long been strong voices in African pastoral care and counseling, their work does not specifically analyze family systems theory, and more specifically, the theories of Murray Bowen, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, and Salvador Minuchin using the theological analysis of gender relations developed through the theological genre known as African women's theology. Further, it is important to note that some of the African women pastoral caregivers, for example Daisy Nwachuku, have written on gender reform, but they have not proposed family systems theory as a heuristic tool for addressing gender problems. In addition, we need to note that even though some work has been done by African women pastoral caregivers on gender reform, gender issues are still peripheral in African pastoral theological literature as exemplified by its minimal occurrence in published work in African pastoral theology, care, and counseling.

<sup>2</sup> The literature being considered in this regard includes only work that deals, explicitly or implicitly, with family systems theory. I am not referring to these scholars' work in its entirety. See Emmanuel Lartey, *Pastoral Counseling in Inter-Cultural*

foundation by examining in-depth the family systems theories of Murray Bowen, Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, and Salvador Minuchin using the theological analysis of gender relations developed by African women theologians. I create a pastoral theological dialogue between African women's theology and family systems theory, demonstrating that family systems theory can be used as a heuristic tool to address gender problems identified by African women theologians.

African women theologians have specifically noted that there are problems in African gender relations because African women are oppressed by cultural values, religious traditions, socio-political, and economic practices that exclude women from full participation in family, church, and society.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they decry the idea held by many African men (and some women) that African cultural traditions and practices do not cause or represent any problems in gender relations, and that African women are not oppressed and, therefore, do not need a theology of liberation. Further, African women theologians engage in efforts to confront and belie the view that feminism is an import and, as such, is a non-issue for Africa.

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*Perspective: A Study of Some African (Ghanaian) and Anglo-American Views of Human Existence and Counseling* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); "Some Contextual Implications for Pastoral Counselling in Ghana," in *Pastoral Care and Counseling in Africa Today*, ed. Jean Masamba ma Mpolo and Daisy Nwachuku (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991); Joseph Ghunney, "[Pastoral Counseling in] Ghana," in *Pastoral Counseling in a Global Church: Voices from the Field*, ed. Robert Wicks and Barry Estadt (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993); Masamba ma Mpolo, *Older Persons and their Families in a Changing Village Society: A Perspective from Zaire* (Washington, D.C.: International Federation on Ageing; and Geneva: World Council of Churches, Office of Family Education, 1984); "Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling," in *The Risks of Growth: Counselling and Pastoral Theology in the African Context*, ed. Masamba ma Mpolo and Wilhelmina Kalu (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992); Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996); and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), among other sources.

Given the issues surrounding gender dynamics in African families and churches, there is need for pastoral theological attention to problems in gender arrangements and dynamics that cause pain and suffering. African pastoral theology has to be at the center of this struggle and seek how to foster a transformative praxis for these problems, using a family systems framework. I believe the problems in gender relations are among the issues by which pastoral theology finds its vocation and its life in African contexts.

Therefore, it is this writer's argument that if pastors and pastoral caregivers do not utilize gender analysis in their pastoral work, they will not be able to provide adequate caregiving (i.e., gender-sensitive caregiving that responds to and/or takes into consideration the kind of gender issues identified by African feminist theologians) to women, men, and families who seek help from the churches. This could be a serious problem for the churches because, without gender sensitivity in the care of women, men, and families, a whole realm of human suffering affecting parishioners will be unattended. In addition, relations between women and men would remain strained. Furthermore, the future of the church could be undermined, as the majority of church members in African churches are women.

#### **Statement of the Thesis and Outline of the Argument**

The thesis of this dissertation is that a critical examination of family systems theory, using African women's theological analysis of gender relations, indicates that selected aspects of family systems theory and therapy are an effective framework and tool for adequate pastoral response to the vital areas of pastoral needs created by gender injustice. More specifically, this examination provides categories of analysis, assessment, and intervention that can be used, in conjunction with African women's theology, to develop a transformative pastoral praxis that responds adequately to gender problems identified by African women theologians. Some family systems notions need to be refined before they can be applied.

The task of this dissertation is therefore threefold. First, this dissertation brings gender relations from the margins to the center of African pastoral theological concern and focus. Second, it examines major themes in African women's theology and the expressed concerns for change. Third, this dissertation analyzes family systems theory showing, for example, how the Bowenian concept of the differentiation of the self, the structural notion of the distribution of power and clearly defined boundaries, and the contextual construct of relational justice can be used in the care for gender problems.

At the heart of this discussion is the proposal of the theological notion of perichoresis, the notion that describes relations of mutuality and reciprocity within the triune God, as an evocative image for gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling—pastoral caregiving that is responsive to African women's quest for anthropological integrity and a better community. The perichoretic model of personhood and relationships proposed in this dissertation affirms that the triune God is the archetype of all healthy relationships and true human community. Thus, pastoral strategies and interventions based on this model promote a gender consciousness and new community in which there is no gender inequality; nor is there any colonization of woman by man, and vice versa. Such a perichoretic community fosters relationships without domination, subordination, or violence.

One fundamental assumption underlying the consideration of African women's theological writings is that the neglect and exclusion of women from equal participation in the life of the family and church, including exclusion from positions of power, promotes an unhealthy way or model of being human. It also provides an unhealthy foundation for doing ministry, including the ministry of pastoral care and counseling. Without a doubt, this way of being and relating perpetuates the suffering of women, promotes male domination, and causes spiritual impoverishment, including for those who engage in discriminatory practices. The consequence of this is that the church fails in the fulfillment of its role and vocation. It is, therefore, the assumption of this dissertation

that gender relations and issues of power differentials in human relationships are of both pastoral and theological significance. They should not be ignored. Until African theology and the church acknowledge, include, and address issues of gender relations, and the marginalization of women and other "outcasts" in their practices as well as in their public discourse, they cannot accurately claim to be redemptive and liberative of the African person. More particularly, African theology cannot correctly claim to be a theology of liberation, nor can it present itself to be pastoral. For it to be such, it must embrace new forms of thought and practice, as well as the emerging visions of what it means to be men and women of faith in a changing world. African women's theological writings provide us with some of these new forms of thought, vision, and opportunity to embrace life-affirming values and practices.

Therefore, this dissertation contends that what African women are saying about church, family, and society is critical and helpful in securing the future of the church in Africa, among other things. It has been documented that the majority of church members and goers in Africa are women.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is problematic not to include women's issues and concerns among the church's priorities for missions and ministry. That is why this dissertation argues that something has to change for there to be the kind of church, society, and world envisioned by African feminist theologians, or Concerned African Women Theologians, as the first convocation of African women doing theology named themselves.<sup>5</sup> If the church is to be relevant and faithful to its mission, it must heed the

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<sup>4</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 109-30.

<sup>5</sup> Teresia Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa," in *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (London: SCM Press, 1996; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 27; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Gospel and Cultures in Africa: Through Women's Eyes," in *Women's Perspectives: Articulating the Liberating Power of the Gospel* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 45; Elisabeth Amoah, "Theology from the Perspective of African Women," in *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action*, ed. Ofelia Ortega (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995).

challenge African women bring to the table. Further, there is an urgency to construct models of caring ministries that are sensitive to the issues raised in African women's theological writings, if the church is to minister effectively and adequately to the needs of all its members--both male and female, children and youth, and people of all races and cultures. If this is not addressed, the church will continue to perpetuate the oppression and subjugation of some of its members and promote unhealthy patterns of relating between the sexes. As a consequence the church will lack in its vocation to respond pastorally to the pastoral needs of all its members. The result will be the church becoming more and more oppressive, irrelevant, and useless to some women and men who want it to change.

Therefore, this study provides, among other things, a pastoral theological response to African women's expression of their experiences of pain, oppression, and marginalization in marriage, family, and church life. At the heart of this response is the quest for and promotion of relational justice. In considering African women's experiences of oppression in relationships, family, and church life, there will also be an examination of some aspects of African traditional values that promote relational justice in human interactions. Like African feminist theologians, my hope is that men and women in African contexts will reach a point where they will stand hand in hand in a tender inclination towards one another for the betterment of each other's condition in life. I contend that relational justice should be the guiding and ordering principle at the heart of human interactions--marital, familial, interpersonal, social, racial, political, and economic--if these relationships are to be fulfilling, empowering, and redemptive.

The sources used in understanding gender relations in the African family, church, and society are mainly writings by African feminist theologians from Central, Eastern, and West Africa. They include Bernadette Mbuy Beya, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Elisabeth Amoah, Teresia Hinga, Ruth Besha, Nyambura Njoroge and others.

I am privileging African feminist theologians because their analysis and assessment of African culture (especially the family, church, and society) provides a window into *women's lived experience* in these contexts--a concrete experience of relational injustice that is perpetrated by certain cultural practices that need to be eradicated. Their focus on contextuality, the importance of gender analysis, and the search for creative transformation of oppressive structures in society provides a framework for looking at relational dynamics in the family and church.

### Definitions/Discussion of Terms

Defining some of the recurring terminology in this study will help to clarify the meaning I attribute to these terms, as well as to locate myself relative to controversial terms such as "feminist" and "gender," among others. First, the term *African Women's Theology*, according to African women theologians, refers to the theology written by African women, from an African woman's experience and perspective. Following African women theologians, I use the terms African women's theology, African feminist theology, and the theology of Concerned African Women Theologians interchangeably in this dissertation.<sup>6</sup> The term *Concerned African Women Theologians* is especially distinctive in that, as Hinga notes, it points to the fact that "contrary to stereotypes of African women as either unaware or indifferent to their oppression, they [describe themselves as] conscious, capable and willing to deal with issues of moral concern." These women view themselves as not only being aware of the issues confronting them, but "they also feel compelled to act towards the resolution of these issues."<sup>7</sup>

African women theologians refer to themselves as *feminists* as well. By this they mean that they are invested in showing how patriarchy has affected African women's

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<sup>6</sup> Hinga, 27-28; Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, "The Challenge of Feminist Theologies," in *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership*, ed. Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 176-77.

<sup>7</sup> Hinga, 28-29.



experience and naming of God, and how sexism has shaped human structures of work, family, worship, and decision-making.<sup>8</sup> They name the gender injustice to women in all areas of women's functioning and relatedness and seek the transformation of "our understanding of God and our relationships together."<sup>9</sup> Congolese social scientist Gertrude Mianda's definition of "feminist" is more or less in agreement with the foregoing discussion, except that she is not a theologian and therefore does not reference God. Mianda, for example, suggests that to be a feminist is "to acknowledge that women are victims of inequalities which are rooted in social life, to take a stance in women's favor, to engage in the search for ways and means to transform socio-economic, political and cultural structures which support these inequalities so that societies will become more equitable for both men and women."<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, this study could be described as feminist because Mianda, for example, defines a "feminist" not on the basis of biology, but on the basis of one's *couverture sociale* (i.e., social coverage) of gender issues.

The term *gender*, in this dissertation, refers to a cultural category that shapes human experience on the basis of "the physiological marks of sex." I follow Carol Riphenburg's definition of gender as a "social and cultural construct based on the social construction of biological sex distinctions."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, gender "permeates all levels of society, from the domestic to the international and global: social interaction

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<sup>8</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 177.

<sup>9</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 176.

<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Mianda, "Shaba Deux. Les Carnets de Mère Marie Gertrude de V.Y. Mudimbe: Un Roman Féministe?" (Shaba two: The notes of Mother Marie Gertrude of V.Y. Mudimbe: A feminist novel?), *Révue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines* 31, no. 2 (1997): 356 (translation mine).

<sup>11</sup> Carol Riphenburg, "Women's Status and Cultural Expression: Changing Gender Relations and Structural Adjustment in Zimbabwe," *Africa Today* 44, no.1 (1997): 46-47.

enacts gender scripts, social institutions fix gendered norms, and social communication engages gendered rules.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, *gender relations* have to do with the patterns of relating based on cultural representations of men, women, and children, expectations and prescriptions about behavior, familial arrangements, gender roles, and the distribution of power and work in the household, among other things. Being *gender-sensitive* means, therefore, being attuned to the cultural, social, political, and economic factors (or dynamics) surrounding gender relations. More specifically, it means being aware of the gendered nature of human relationships and how the social and cultural construction of gender, as African women theologians argue, positions men in the place of privilege and domination, whereas women are socialized to be in the secondary position relative to their male counterparts.

*Relational justice*, in this study, refers to the subjective need and demand for egalitarian relationships of love, justice, and shared responsibility within the family and society. There is relational justice when the give and take of mutuality is established, and all participants in a relationship show an awareness and genuine concern for the needs of others.

My understanding of the term *culture* follows Emmanuel Lartey’s definition that culture is “the way in which social groups develop distinct patterns of life and give ‘expressive form’ to their social and material experience.”<sup>13</sup> It includes the ideas, values, norms, forms of social relationships, understandings of optimal personhood or personality dysfunction, and ways in which patterns of life in a group are structured, experienced, understood, and interpreted.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rippenburg, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (London: Cassell, 1997), 9.

<sup>14</sup> This description of what constitutes “culture” is adapted from Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 9-10.

*Family systems theory* is a psychotherapeutic theory that conceptualizes the life of the family by viewing each member relative to other family members in terms of how each affects and is affected by the others. The individual is understood “within the context of a dynamic family system with its own unique developmental stages, history, and cultural relatedness.”<sup>15</sup> Family systems therapy, then, is concerned with restructuring a dysfunctional family system by modifying interpersonal contacts or beliefs about those contacts, with the aim of altering interaction patterns, therefore “allowing the presenting problem to be unnecessary.”<sup>16</sup>

### Methodology

The methodology used in this dissertation includes both pastoral theological and socio-cultural analysis with a particular focus on gender and culture as two lenses through which family systems theory and the African family and church as presented by African feminist theologians are examined. This methodology is anchored in African women's theological methodology which centers on listening to and giving voice to the specificity of women's concrete, lived experiences in light of central affirmations of the Christian faith. In approaching African women's theological discourse by listening to African women's experience and stories *in their own words*, this dissertation intends to highlight the pastoral significance of listening. For in the pastoral act of *truly* listening to one another, we begin to transform the world.

This dissertation's methodology is also dialogical. This is based on the methodology of African women's theology whose starting point is women's lived experience, which is brought then into dialogue with Scripture, African culture, and the Christian tradition. Drawing from this model, this dissertation brings into dialogue

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<sup>15</sup> B.J. Hagedorn, “Family Theory and Therapy,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, gen. ed. Rodney Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 423-26.

<sup>16</sup> William Griffin, *Family Therapy: Fundamentals of Theory and Practice* (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1993), 9.

**African women's theology, family systems theory, and pastoral theology and care. The aim is the enrichment of all these dialogue partners, for the enhancement of the church's ministry of pastoral care and counseling.**

### **Scope and Limitations**

**As stated and demonstrated above, this dissertation seeks to put into dialogue Bowenian, structural, and contextual family systems theories with issues raised by African feminist theologians--these include particularly issues dealing with unequal gender relations, relational power differentials in the family and the church, as well as the cultural assumptions and norms that order gender relations and human interactions in African society.**

**It must be noted that this dissertation will not deal with the different needs of distinct types of families in Africa such as two-parent families, single parent families, dual career families, polygamous families, matrilineal families, or patrilineal ones. Nor will it investigate the nature or anthropology of the African family or the sociology of the African church. This study is rather interested in the psychological, relational, spiritual, and social dynamics involved in the functioning of African women and men in these settings, with the goal of responding pastorally and theologically to the problems that emerge from these dynamics. In other words, this dissertation seeks to uncover (through the works of African feminist theologians) psychological, relational, spiritual, and social processes as they relate to women's and men's functioning in family, church, and society, and utilize selected schools of family systems theory to conceptualize how the church may design models of pastoral care and counseling that enhance women's well-being, as well as that of all persons involved in the life of the family and church.**

**Another limitation of this study is that it is written from the perspective of an African male. As such, this writer and researcher stands among African male theologians, as well as African males in general, who are being critiqued and called to account for sexist practices that marginalize, neglect or, in some instances, trivialize**

women's issues and concerns. Although this dissertation seeks to help correct the neglect of gender issues and the absence of gender as a central category of analysis, assessment, and intervention in African pastoral theology, care, and counseling, it is by definition possible that my African male perspectives can misunderstand, misinterpret, and distort African women's perspectives. If this is the case in the following chapters, I would like to be corrected.

### **Review of Closely Related Literature**

Since this dissertation asserts the need for more cultural and gender sensitive critique of family systems theory for its usefulness in an African setting, the following discussion analyzes succinctly the works of some African scholars who have considered family systems theory in their work. This examination is helpful in illustrating the problem discussed above, and it also argues that for family systems theory truly to be a viable tool for pastoral care and counseling in an African setting, it must be sensitive to the issues raised by African women's theology in relation to *women's lived experiences*. We now turn to the discussion of African pastoral theologians and pastoral psychologists who have used family systems theory in their work.

Emmanuel Larrey is one of the African pastoral theologians and pastoral psychologists who have included *systems thinking* in their work. It should be noted, however, that Larrey's important work is interested in a variety of Western schools of psychotherapy as to how their views of the human person and human existence compare with some West African perspectives.<sup>17</sup> It is in the context of this comparative study of various schools of counseling and psychotherapy with African thought systems that Larrey discusses some aspects of family systems theory's understanding of the human person. Larrey's study integrates Ghanaian views of human existence (as they exist among the Ga and Akan communities of Southern Ghana) with traditional Christian

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<sup>17</sup> Larrey, *Pastoral Counseling in Inter-Cultural Perspective*.

theology, and then it engages in dialogue the proposed Ghanaian Christian views of human existence with Western theories of psychotherapy. Implications for pastoral counseling are also discussed. Lartey's focus on this one aspect of family systems theory (i.e., its view of the human person and human existence) imposes limits on his discussion of family systems theory. He emphasizes family systems theory's view of human existence, and thus he does not examine major systemic concepts of analysis, assessment, and intervention and how these could be used as heuristic tools to address specific problems. Furthermore, since Lartey wrote the work being discussed before African women's theological analysis of gender relations was widely available, he understandably does not include their gender analysis in his examination of the applicability of aspects of family systems theory in African contexts.<sup>18</sup>

Lartey's contribution lies in his analysis and assertion that the concepts of interdependence and systemic relatedness, among other things, provide a basis for considering systemic family therapy as a viable model of pastoral care and counseling in African contexts.<sup>19</sup> This statement is based on Lartey's assessment that family therapy's focus on human relationships is, in many respects, compatible with African and Christian insights. Family systems theory seeks to understand the human person in the context of his or her relationships. The African tradition maintains that to be human is to belong, that is, to be part of the community. This view, according to Lartey, is predicated on the belief that there is mutual influence and interpenetration between the various components of life in the African universe.<sup>20</sup> Hence, he chooses the term *relational holism* to describe

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<sup>18</sup> Lartey's later work reflects his concern for gender justice, and he specifically references African women theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and others. See Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Counseling in Inter-Cultural Perspective*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> See Lartey, "Some Contextual Implications for Pastoral Counseling in Ghana,"

"a holism which is at once intrapersonal, interpersonal, and corporate" in the African world.<sup>21</sup> For Lartey, the Christian faith supports this perspective of life. It affirms, in many respects, this relational holism and "helps us to clarify the strands of the network of relationships within which we are embedded with its freedoms and responsibilities."<sup>22</sup>

Lartey's understanding of African relational holism leads him to the affirmation that the most meaningful and effective models for pastoral counseling in African contexts would be family systems therapy and group psychotherapy, because they aim at "working at and for harmonious relations within identifiable groups of persons who are in some form of close relationships, and which are based on a 'systems' approach."<sup>23</sup> I will be drawing from Lartey's notion of relational holism in Chapter 5 to support my proposal for the theological category of perichoresis as a viable worldview for life in the African family and in the church, as well as for the conceptualization and practice of pastoral care and counseling.

In addition, Lartey contends that family systems' focus on intersubjective relatedness increases its wide applicability.<sup>24</sup> This dissertation builds, in part, on these affirmations of Lartey's work to explore in more depth the relevance of systems theory for addressing issues raised by African women's analysis of gender relations and women's status in the African family, church, and society.

Ghanaian pastoral theologian Joseph Ghunney is also interested in family systems

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 107.

theory. In his article on pastoral counseling in Ghana, he provides a reflection on the task of integrating Western theories of counseling in the context of African culture(s).<sup>25</sup>

Ghunney argues that to do this, an understanding of and insight into the relationship of the individual to one's family, clan, and tribe are essential. Pastoral counseling in African contexts needs to be integrated within the context of the multifaceted African worldviews and cultures.<sup>26</sup> However, in his affirmation of the centrality of the family in African life and thought, Ghunney does not use African women's theological analysis of gender relations to critique the African traditions that regulate human relationships and interactions in the family and society. It is true that Ghunney does not endorse or advocate for these traditions. He simply describes them.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, one who is aware of the available literature on gender critique by African women theologians quickly notices that Ghunney, who is writing in 1993, a time when significant literature by African women theologians has begun to be known in African theological circles, fails to point out some oppressive elements that need to be eradicated if all individuals are to live liberated lives in African societies.<sup>28</sup> For example, Ghunney indicates that marriage in Africa is a "sacred obligation to all human beings," and that "failure on the part of any adult to marry is to stop human life—an attempt to diminish humankind on earth, which, is a major offense in the eyes of the society. Adults who are not married are not given positions of responsibility, and their advice is not taken seriously."<sup>29</sup> When such

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<sup>25</sup> See Ghunney, "[Pastoral Counseling in] Ghana."

<sup>26</sup> Ghunney, 82.

<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to Kathleen Greider for this perspective on Ghunney's work.

<sup>28</sup> The first Conference of Concerned African Women in Theology was organized in 1989 in Accra, Ghana, Ghunney's homeland. Further, selected papers from that Conference were published in 1992. See Oduyoye and Kanyoro, eds., *Will to Arise*.

<sup>29</sup> Ghunney, 88.



statements are considered in light of the challenge African women theologians are posing to the family, church, and society, clearly one sees how these kinds of values promote and perpetuate the oppression of individuals who do not fulfill this type of societal and cultural expectations. One may also note that people may be affected differently across gender lines when it comes to what Ghunney calls "failure to marry, or to procreate."<sup>30</sup> As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, African women theologians consider marriage a "sacred" trust. But they insist that it should not be viewed as simply ensuring the perpetuation of human life, although this is a very important aspect of married life if people choose to rear children. Companionship, they argue, should take a central place in this sacred institution as well. Further, as we shall see later, African women theologians argue that there are many other ways that women can contribute to the "perpetuation" of human life. Marriage and motherhood are not the only way to do so. In this sense, then, "failure on the part of any adult to marry" should not necessarily be viewed as "an attempt to diminish humankind on earth," as described by Ghunney.<sup>31</sup> In addition, marriage itself should not be viewed as an obligation for every person. It should be entered by choice, and joyfully.

At any rate, Ghunney's discussion of the aim of marriage in Akan (traditional) worldview places procreation high on the list. He states: "[the] main aim of marriage is to procreate new members of the community. Childlessness is looked upon with scorn... because children [are viewed] as the seal and glory of marriage."<sup>32</sup> Here, Ghunney does

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. I will discuss in Chapter 6 a case study that reveals some of these dynamics, and how pastoral caregivers may approach such situations in ways that affirm those who are ostracized because of "the failure to marry or procreate." The case study specifically addresses issues of infertility and how they affect the husband-wife relationship. Issues of singleness are also discussed.

<sup>31</sup> Ghunney, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 89.

not address how a belief such as this is potentially oppressive, and even demeaning, to those couples who do not have children--by choice or by biological factors. In addition to this, Ghunney observes that the Akans "find their humanness when they live in consonance with the morals of the society and live for others. A departure from family and its norms may cause problems."<sup>33</sup> Certainly, one strength of the African worldview lies in its philosophy of communality which expresses concern for the well-being of all members of the community. In fact, most Africans would affirm that they *live* only when they participate in the family and community life, and most importantly, when they uphold the (caring) norms of the community.<sup>34</sup>

However, Ghunney does not attach qualifiers to the norms that are expected to guide human action and behavior in society. One wonders if by simply describing these traditions and calling the pastoral caregiver to help people to relate well as they live within the bounds of these norms and values, Ghunney does not assume that these values and norms are good for the community and for all its members. Being exposed to African women's analysis of African cultural norms as they pertain to relationship regulations and family expectations, I find such an understanding of the pastoral task to be wanting. African women's perspectives would highlight questions such as these: "What is the nature of the cultural norms regulating relationships and family life?" "Who formulated them?" "Are they contributive to the flourishing of both men and women, or to one gender only?" "Who do they serve best, men or women, or both?" "What elements in these values and norms must be promoted, and which ones should be eradicated?" Such a suspicious stance and perspective (liberation theology has called it the hermeneutics of suspicion) is informed by African women's analysis and examination of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>34</sup> I will develop this line of thought in Chapter 5 when I introduce the theological notion of perichoresis as a strong foundation for optimal communal living and pastoral practice.

gender relations and women's status in the family and church. This hermeneutical orientation is a very important aspect to include in our pastoral assessment and interventions, because the questions I have raised above have the potential for enabling pastors and pastoral caregivers to provide gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling. African women's work has raised our consciousness to the possibility (and/or reality) that cultural, family, and societal norms, when adhered to and upheld uncritically, perpetuate suffering for some members of the human community.

As to the use of family systems theory, Ghunney's theory of pastoral counseling integrates some concepts of family systems theory and Adlerian psychology with some aspects of African (Akan) culture. He finds the relational and social focus of, respectively, family systems theory and Adlerian psychology relevant to his understanding of the task of pastoral counseling in African settings. Because the family is central in African thought and life, Ghunney suggests that the task of pastoral counseling is one of "helping people relate to one another."<sup>35</sup> This relational basis for pastoral counseling can be used, for our purposes, to help men, women, and families resolve relationship conflicts caused by gender injustice.

Pastoral theologian and psychologist Masamba ma Mpolo of Democratic Congo uses concepts, ideas, and techniques from systemic family theory and African traditions to make an analysis and study of relational dynamics in contemporary and traditional African families. In his book *Older Persons and their Families in a Changing Village Society: A Perspective from Zaire*,<sup>36</sup> Masamba weaves systemic ideas with African traditional cosmologies in his analysis of family structure, multigenerational relationships, the therapeutic value of the African palaver system, and belief in bewitchment. Because, like Lartey, he wrote this book before the analysis and gender

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<sup>35</sup> Ghunney, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Masamba, *Older Persons and their Families*.

critique done by African women theologians was widely published, Masamba does not consider how gender dynamics organize relationships and probably influence the care of the elderly in African families and societies.

Given the theological analysis of gender relations done by African women theologians, it would be interesting to examine, for example, the differences between the relationships between female and male older persons and their families, paying particular attention to how gender influences family members' attitudes and the quality of care provided to these older persons. How does the care provided to a female older person differ from the care provided to a male elderly person? How does the community view and approach an older female as compared to how it deals with an older male person? What place is accorded to each in terms of what their "chronological giftedness" can contribute to the well-being of the family, and the community at large? Exploring these questions, I suspect, would reveal different attitudes and patterns of care based on gender factors.

At any rate, there are several aspects of Masamba's work that support this dissertation's concern with problems in gender relations. Masamba's work, in general, shows his concern for "appropriate family life education and counseling services within churches."<sup>37</sup> He recognizes the influence of culture in shaping the individual's perception towards oneself, others, and the environment. Thus, he emphasizes the necessity for the church to be involved in the empowerment of individuals and families to deal constructively with "conflicting and inhibiting personal drives, cultural and religious values" in the African family.<sup>38</sup> While Masamba's work discussed here does not specifically address gender relations, he clearly is concerned with interpersonal and social

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<sup>37</sup> Masamba, "Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling," 2.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

relations. Therefore, his ideas can be used in our conceptualization of how to address gender problems identified by African women theologians. Further, Masamba's work provides, for our purposes, a foundation in that he discusses the church's responsibility in the guidance of African extended families to understand and embrace the impact of change on the identities of individuals and groups in relation to economic, political, and sociocultural changes. This concern can be applied to enable families to accept changes in gender relations. Indeed, Masamba's concern for the influence of "inhibiting personal drives, cultural and religious values" on interpersonal and social relationships can be broadened to include our discussion of problems in gender relations generated by personal and religio-cultural values that hamper the growth of women, men, and children.

More specifically, Masamba understands the *pastoral psychotherapy of families* as being essentially concerned with equipping the family to be "the center par excellence of support for, and confrontation among its members, thus enabling the individual and the entire family, through dialogue and rituals of reconciliation, to deal constructively with conflicting and inhibiting personal drives, cultural and religious values."<sup>39</sup> This is an insightful description of the task of pastoral psychotherapy for families. It can be generalized to the practice of pastoral care and counseling of gender relations. Pastoral care and counseling that is informed by the analysis of gender relations would necessarily seek to equip family members to process and correct their "conflicting and inhibiting personal drives, cultural and religious values" that cause gender conflicts and impoverish interpersonal relationships. When supported and guided by gender-sensitive pastors and pastoral counselors, family members would be aided to develop an atmosphere that is supportive of the well-being of all members, and indeed, an atmosphere that enables family participants to generate new gender arrangements that would create a "psychosocial atmosphere conducive to personal growth and family cohesion," to use

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Masamba's phrase.<sup>40</sup> When the personal growth of both women and men is supported and promoted, the family will renew its capacity not only to act as a system of support but also as an agent of social change.

It is important to note again that even though Masamba's discussion of the "social pathologies that cripple the individual" do not include cultural and religious values that create problems in gender relations, the latter can clearly be included in this category. His commitment to teach individuals, families, and communities about these social pathologies provide us with an inspiration to further African people's awareness of problems in gender relations and create "opportunities for developing sensitive people for their personal and social growth."<sup>41</sup> Masamba calls this pastoral activity "education in redemptive relationships."<sup>42</sup> Although Masamba, in the work being considered here, does not engage particularly in analyzing specific themes, concepts, and methods of healing in family systems theory and therapy, his discussion of the task and goal of pastoral care and counseling, indeed, the goal of Christian education, theological education, and therapy in general, is relevant to this project. Masamba indicates that therapy in its diverse expressions such as family therapy, pastoral counseling, and logotherapy, as well as Christian and theological education, share the same commitment: "helping individuals and communities of people to learn how to grow, and to actualize their possibilities throughout their life."<sup>43</sup>

This dissertation agrees with the understanding of the pastoral theological task and the aim of the psychotherapeutic tradition as expressed by Masamba. Like

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 13.

Masamba, we are concerned with educating people in *redemptive relationships*, so they will be able to learn how to grow in the way they relate across gender lines in the family, church, and society. Masamba's view of the goal of therapy in general clearly would be supportive of the concerns of African women theologians for women's growth, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. It also provides a basis on which to challenge *social pathologies* that create gender problems and a chasm between women and men. This basis can also be used as a ground on which to challenge men and call them to accept adaptively the impact of the changes in gender relations on their identities.

Clearly, there is a gap in African pastoral theology and care literature discussing culture-wide gender stereotypes and how they affect gender relations in the family, church, and society.<sup>44</sup> Given this reality, this dissertation seeks, among other things, to bring gender relations from the margins to the center of pastoral theological concern and focus, with the hope of helping to bring the needed transformation of human relationships in the family, church, and society. To accomplish this, I suggest that African women's experiences and responses to constricting and inhibiting cultural norms and expectations are to be taken seriously and given a central place in the church's ministry of pastoral care and counseling.

As has been stated above and will be demonstrated throughout this study, the family is an important concept and frame of reference in most of Africa. This is shown, for example, by the selection of the family as a conceptual framework for African ecclesiological elaboration, church life, and faith practice in Africa. The African Synod of the Catholic Church (held in Rome in 1994), in its efforts to incarnate and inculturate the Christian faith more deeply into the African soil, voted unanimously the theme of Church-as-Family as a starting point for African ecclesiology. The bishops and

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<sup>44</sup>As stated earlier, even though some African women pastoral caregivers have long been strong voices for gender reform in African pastoral theology, gender as a category of pastoral theological reflection and care is still peripheral to African pastoral theology and care.

theologians of Africa were quite insistent that the church in Africa cannot talk about inculturation without talking about the family. Their position was based on the conviction that "African traditional culture is centered on the family."<sup>45</sup> The bishops and theologians argued that it is through the inclusion of the concept of the family (theologically) in the thought and life of the church, among other things, that the gap between faith and culture could truly be bridged.

This idea finds both support and criticism in the African ecclesial and theological community. Some African theologians, including Congolese Bénézet Bujo and Laurent Monsengwo, contend that the Black African notion of family could deeply enrich and perhaps renovate the "entire church" (meaning the Catholic Church).<sup>46</sup> Others (such as Ugandan historian and theologian John Waliggo), while they are in favor of the image, caution that the concept could perpetuate the existence of oppressive structures within the church and society because of its hierarchical structure. Waliggo contends that the model of Church-as-Family has some fundamental problems that need clarification, for it really to "serve the purpose for which it is being recommended."<sup>47</sup>

I agree with Waliggo. The Church-as-Family concept could enrich, and in fact, help the church renew and reinvent itself.<sup>48</sup> I also contend that, if the church is to truly be

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<sup>45</sup> IMBISA (Inter-regional Meeting of the Bishops of Southern Africa), "Our Bishops Want Family on Synod Agenda," in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, compiled and edited by the Africa Faith and Justice Network under the direction of Maura Browne (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 46.

<sup>46</sup> See Bénézet Bujo, "On the Road Toward an African Ecclesiology," in *African Synod*, 147, 167.

<sup>47</sup> John Mary Waliggo, "'The Synod of Hope' at a Time of Crisis in Africa," in *African Synod*, 208.

<sup>48</sup> I use the notion of church generically here. It does not refer to one particular denomination as in Waliggo.



a "sacrament of justice and liberation," to use Jean-Marc Ela's expression,<sup>49</sup> we need to take seriously the kinds of issues that African feminist theologians have brought to the attention of the church and society. I think that such an examination can provide insights that can be helpful for the strengthening and renewal of the African family. Indeed, such a renewal and transformation may not only benefit the family, but also the church and society at large. The following section introduces major theoretical resources used in the argument of this study.

### **Introduction of Major Theoretical Resources Used in the Argument**

#### **Introductory Comments**

In this section, I introduce the two major sources used in the development of the argument of this dissertation. The presentation focuses on major concerns, themes, and orientations in African women's theology and in family systems theory. This discussion provides a brief overview of what the theoretical foundations of these two schools of thought and practice are, as well as what constitutes their finalities. Included in this discussion are the reasons why the theology of Concerned African Women, when taken seriously, can strengthen the pastoral capacity to address problems in gender relations as a pastoral theological imperative in Africa. It is also pointed out that family systems theory, when used critically, provides useful tools in the church's response to the concerns for gender issues raised in African women's theological analysis of relationships between women and men. Introduction to these sources is important here so that the reader will know the rationale for choosing these, and therefore be prepared to anticipate the in-depth analysis provided in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

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<sup>49</sup> Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986).

### Central Themes of African Women's Theology

African women's theology is a theology inspired by women's lived experiences in African contexts. It is a situational theology<sup>50</sup> which addresses the issues related to the situation and experience of women, whom, according to African women writing theology, are considered as subordinate to men (i.e., they hold a secondary place in family, church, and society at large). In the words of Musimbi Kanyoro:

[African] Feminist theologies have their rooting in women's experiences in church and society. Their purpose is not to inject political correctness of the gender agenda into the church, but rather to invite men and women in the *church radically to examine our understanding of God and of our relationships together*. . . . God calls us, women and men alike, into *right relationships with each other, with all creation*.<sup>51</sup>

As stated in this excerpt, African feminist theology is a theology of liberation in that it is guided by a vision that seeks to free both men and women to live together in a partnership of equals--a vision of a world in which both men and women are free to live with and relate in non-oppressive ways to one another. As such, African feminist theology is directed not only to oppressed women, but it also hopes to enlighten men and enlist them to participate in the cause and vision of building a better world in which people would not be segregated and excluded from participation on the basis of any particularizing identity such as gender, class, race, level of education, geographical location, and the like. Its goal is to develop and promote "right relationships" not only between men and women, but also among all peoples. Indeed, African feminist theology is an attempt by African women to come to terms with their situation by interpreting the gospel in such a way that their situation, and the situation of men and children, will begin

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<sup>50</sup> I borrow this term from Joseph Mante in his unpublished dissertation entitled *Towards an Ecological Christian Theology of Creation in an African Context*, Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1994 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge of Feminist Theologies," 176 (emphasis mine).

to be challenged, and changed for the better--indeed, for the well-being of the whole of humanity and creation. Oduyoye asserts:

Women's reading of Scripture and theological reflections struggle for a place in the community of interpretation of the church. Hence the contemporary efforts to get women to write, to publish, to communicate, and to seek alternative communication avenues. Women's words are more often than not delivered as bold prints of real life--not just theories. Women speak of human beings as they struggle to keep their humanity under slum conditions, in the face of brutalities of war and the anonymity imposed on women by the non-recognition of their presence and contribution. . . . The struggle is to get men to tune their ears so they can hear women. Men who have come to realize the evils of patriarchy and women who know the shortcomings of matriarchy are called to listen together to what contemporary feminism has to offer in facing the challenges of human relations and ecological justice.<sup>52</sup>

This excerpt reveals what Oduyoye, elsewhere, has called a spirituality of resistance and reconstruction.<sup>53</sup> Women revolt and resist against the forces of evil that continue to relegate them to a position of powerlessness, silence, and invisibility. Women resist by giving expression to that which has given them the will to arise and voice their concern for the well-being of us all.<sup>54</sup> They refuse to conform to the status quo and invite all of us to embrace the transforming love of God which calls us to challenge the accepted oppressive norms and engage in the construction of relational patterns that will mediate the healing and empowering grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This involves a struggle to get men to "tune their ears" to these new voices in theological circles, and especially in the church. Hence, Oduyoye's call to the church to listen to women's expressions of their experience and situation in the church and society.

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<sup>52</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Foreword: The Beauty of Women's Revolt," in *The Power We Celebrate: Women's Stories of Faith and Power*, ed. Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro and Wendy S. Robins (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), vii, viii.

<sup>53</sup> See Mary John Mananzan et al., eds., *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>54</sup> See Oduyoye and Kanyoro, eds. *Will to Arise*.

She is sure that "[those] men and women who open their ears to the words of 'feminists' will hear a revolt against the ugliness of a world under the influence of evil impulses."<sup>55</sup> She maintains that such listening will open people to face the challenges of oppressive human relations, as people will take on the task proposed to the church by concerned African women theologians, namely, to engage in the building of healthy relational patterns and a supportive community which are contributive to the well-being of all. This means the deconstruction of rigid gender values regulating human interactions, the appropriation of liberative traditional aspects of these, and the creation of new ones that fulfill the dream for a better human community committed to the well-being of all.

Ruth Besha picks up on this theme by emphasizing that the church can play a significant role in the fulfillment of this dream for a better human community. However, she first points out the church's contribution in reinforcing patriarchal values in society, its failure to promote change in the area of social relationships, and its support of diminishing and exclusive cultural and religious practices.<sup>56</sup> She argues that the history of the church has been one of reinforcing the patriarchal values in society and that, in dealing with gender inequality, "the church has usually lagged behind secular institutions."<sup>57</sup> Besha holds that the church should have been a champion of gender equality and relational justice in society. But, being itself behind secular institutions, as far as the promotion of women's liberation and fuller participation in society are concerned, it has been difficult for it to promote a liberative philosophy of life for all, and a gender inclusive theology, and practice. The fact that the church has "lagged behind"

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<sup>55</sup> Oduyoye, "Foreword: The Beauty of Women's Revolt," viii.

<sup>56</sup> Ruth Besha, "Life of Endless Struggle: The Position of Women in Africa," in *Women, Violence, and Nonviolent Change*, ed. Aruna Gnanadson, Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, and Lucia Ann McSpadden (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

secular institutions in addressing issues of gender and relational equality is appalling. Equally appalling is the fact that even as women have identified issues and areas of their lives that need to be changed, the church's male leadership seems still to resist the call to include these in the church's "priority list," so to speak. Besha, for example, notes that "reports and studies from different areas [in Africa] show that while church women's groups correctly identify the constraints [placed on women], the mainstream leadership of the church has not yet come to see these issues as a priority."<sup>58</sup> Hence, her call for the church to be aware and mindful of African women's position in African societies in terms of social, economic, and cultural constraints that limit women's participation and access to resources.

Besha, like other African women theologians, is very insistent on the role of the church in the process of change for several reasons. First, the oppression of women occurs in Christian families as it does in non-Christian families. Given the church's proximity to Christian families and homes, and its potential influence in effecting social change, it can make a great contribution toward the change desired by concerned African women in theology. Secondly, the church has long been speaking on issues of imperialism and global injustices. It therefore has the resources and the language to address the issues raised by African women's theology. In Besha's words: "When we speak about gender inequality, about women suffering under heavy workloads and discriminatory traditions, we are also talking of Christian women, about relations that exist in Christian families. While the church can be applauded for speaking out against global injustices, its fight against the problems ordinary people face in their day-to-day lives will eventually decide the continued life of the church in Africa as elsewhere."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Most of the African women's theology used in this dissertation represents a new genre of theological literature in that it comes from numerous articles in a variety of scholarly journals both in Africa and abroad. Many other articles are in edited books and newsletters (not to mention women's oral theology done on the continent in churches through sermons, songs, Bible studies, etc.). Collective and church-based forms of publications reflect Concerned African women theologians' commitment to "doing theology in community." There are also books on specific theological topics by individual authors. My study of these resources has revealed that there is a dissatisfaction with the way African theology is being done by African men. Most of all, women doing theology contend that African theology (i.e., the theology done by African males) falls short of fulfilling its mission in that it lacks an adequate consideration of *women's lived experience* and its challenge to theology and the church. Also missing is the consideration of women's contribution to the church and its various ministries. Indeed, African feminist theologians challenge African theology for neglecting and not taking seriously women's situation as a significant component of the African reality.<sup>60</sup> Such an approach, according to African feminist theologians, is incomplete in that it neglects to include one of the significant parts of the African experience into its theological enterprise. More specifically, African women doing theology have decried the fact that African male theologians and the church have not paid attention to issues of gender inequalities and oppression as they pertain to marriage, family life, and the place of women in the church and in African society as a whole.

There are at least two main reasons why the theology done by Concerned African women is to be taken seriously in the African pastoral theological reflection in this dissertation. First, African feminist theology has brought to the surface the issue of

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<sup>60</sup> For an extended discussion of what constitutes African reality, see Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

gender inequality in African contexts. More specifically, it has uncovered the gendered nature of human interactions, as well as how these (gendered) relational patterns are regulated by certain cultural values that oppress and diminish women's and men's humanity. From a pastoral perspective, it is important that the church respond in a healing manner to this experience of suffering generated by unequal gender relations and relational power differentials which Mercy Amba Oduyoye has called "the oldest power struggle[s] of humanity."<sup>61</sup>

Secondly, African feminist theologians propose a vision of wholeness for both men and women, and for the whole of creation. By challenging the cultural assumptions that regulate family life and church practices, they passionately seek to explore and discover new models and possibilities of being men and women, as well as create new cultural norms that would appropriately guide, support, and sustain individuals and families in their struggles to relate in ways that uphold the dignity and integrity of all who participate in family and church life.

### **Family Systems Theory: A Brief Analysis**

#### **Central themes and philosophical commitments**

The systems perspective would have us see each member of a family in relation to other family members, as each affects and is affected by the other persons. According to systems theory, it makes no sense to analyze any person independently. To understand each person in a family, one must study how each is in relation to every other family member. To study one apart from the others, out of the context of family relationships, is to know that person relative to the new context . . . but not in the context of his or her family relationships.<sup>62</sup>

Family systems theory has become one of the most influential and widely used theoretical frameworks in assessing, understanding, and treating problems in human

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<sup>61</sup> See Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Raphael Becvar and Dorothy Becvar, *Systems Theory and Family Therapy* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 6.

behavior, or any individual, relational, or family problem. The theory has as its premise that all difficulties are an aspect of (family) systems functioning. Problem behavior or pathology is seen as both a personal and environmental problem. The theory argues that, although some pathologies are manifested through the individual, the latter is probably a symptom-bearer for more widespread pathology in the (family) system.

Therefore, this theoretical framework seeks to improve the life of the individual, the couple, or the family by locating the difficulties they experience within the larger family context. This means that other relational and systemic dynamics are examined in order both to locate the source of the problem and to address it by trying to change systemic patterns that are believed to generate it. In this sense, treatment and/or clinical interventions focus on the system as a whole, rather than on the individual alone. This way of conceiving the individual's and the family's functioning or dysfunctioning is called *systems thinking*.<sup>63</sup>

Briefly stated, family systems theory affirms the influence of the family or relational system in the genesis, development, and maintenance of problem behavior, interpersonal conflicts, or any other pathological event between people. It rejects any theory of pathology in which the individual is viewed as the sole locus and cause of pathology.

My selection of family systems theory as a tool for addressing some of the gender issues raised by African feminist theologians is based on its perspective of what constitutes healthy or unhealthy family or relational processes. Family systems' view that

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<sup>63</sup> William C. Nichols and Craig A. Everett, *Systemic Family Therapy: An Integrative Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 1986), 65.



each member of a family must always be considered in relation to other family members (specifically in terms of how each member affects or is affected by the other persons) is, I believe, very helpful in dealing with African feminist theologians' concern with the development of "right relationships" that may correct what family systems theory may view as "unhealthy" relationship patterns. This examination will be fully developed in Chapter 4 where I will discuss in-depth the essential elements of the three schools of family systems I have selected. Let me now discuss the major theoretical orientations in family systems theory. This discussion will be helpful not only for understanding the three schools chosen in this dissertation, but also for locating them in their proper theoretical contexts.

#### **Major theoretical orientations**

Family therapy is any attempt to modify salient environmental features, most importantly interpersonal contacts or beliefs about those contacts, that alters interaction patterns, allowing the presenting problem to be unnecessary.<sup>64</sup>

There are a few theoretical orientations in family systems theory that share similar underlying assumptions about the individual, the family, human problems, and how to treat them. But there are also significant differences as to their philosophical commitments and points of emphasis. Three main theoretical orientations in family systems theory have been identified by Griffin:

(1) ahistorical; (2) historical; and (3) experiential.<sup>65</sup> Within each of these orientations, there are significant differences in terms of how they approach the family and work to remove the presenting problem.

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<sup>64</sup> Griffin, *Family Therapy: Fundamentals of Theory and Practice*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> See Griffin, 10; Nichols and Everett, *Systemic Family Therapy*, 186, have also suggested three main theoretical perspectives within family systems theory, and these are

Ahistorical models include the following models or schools of thought: strategic, behavioral, structural, psychoeducational, and new communication models. The historical orientation includes psychoanalytic object relations theory, Bowenian, and contextual theory. Finally, the experiential orientation is represented by at least two major theorists, namely, Carl Whitaker and Virginia Satir.<sup>66</sup> The three systemic family theories selected for the purposes of this dissertation fall in the ahistorical (structural theory) and historical (Bowenian and contextual theories) models.

It should be noted that unlike some early family therapists who believed that the "family was the causative agent of severe psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder," most theoretical orientations presented above have moved away from that position.<sup>67</sup> Some of them now try to maintain a balance between the reciprocal influences happening between the individual and his or her environment and argue that "disturbed family interactions themselves do not [necessarily] cause, but rather [may] follow from, severe disorders in a member."<sup>68</sup> Others are not as interested in the origin of pathology as in how it is maintained. Salvador Minuchin, for example, argues that the origin of a problem is less relevant than how it persists, since the system both maintains

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similar to Griffin's categories. These are: (1) interactional perspectives; (2) historical perspectives; and (3) existential perspectives.

<sup>66</sup> We will not discuss this orientation of family systems theory in this dissertation.

<sup>67</sup> See John Clarkin and Daniel Carpenter, "Family Therapy in Historical Perspective," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bruce Bongar and Larry E. Beutler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 208.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

and is maintained by the symptom.<sup>69</sup> As noted above, Minuchin's structural family theory falls in the ahistorical orientation group.

Murray Bowen, one of the major figures in the multigenerational family therapy which is classified in the historical category, emphasizes the multigenerational transmission of pathology, the individual's intrapsychic evolution, and the person's individuation and differentiation from the family of origin.<sup>70</sup> Bowen's theory examines these aspects of the individual's life within the context not only of the current family life, but also by including the history of the family in the dynamics that maintain the problem. The interest is not in the origin of the problem per se, but rather on what maintains it. The goal of therapy here is differentiation. It is believed that the more an individual can differentiate in the family of origin, the better adjusted that person will be.

Contextual theory, on its part, is concerned with the relational field and how the four *relational realities* of this field (namely, objectifiable facts, individual psychology, systems of transactional patterns, and ethics of due consideration, or relational ethics) can help us understand the origin of the problem and how it is maintained. Further, the four dimensions of relational reality are also used to gain an understanding of the interpersonal world of a client and through it, his or her "self." Such understanding can be utilized to design clinical intervention and, thus, engage the client in the process of change.<sup>71</sup>

Although each theory is different in its approach and areas of investigation and emphasis, it can be observed that there is a unifying thread among these three major

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<sup>69</sup> See Salvador Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>70</sup> See Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978); Griffin, 77; and Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>71</sup> Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Barbara R. Krasner, *Between Give and Take: A Critical Guide to Contextual Therapy* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1986), 44.

**theoretical orientations in family systems theory: most of them affirm that the individual's problems are to be dealt with adequately by placing them within the context of the family system and/or significant relationships in which one is involved. Although some theorists seek to discover the origin of the problem, the main goal is to uncover how the problem persists, as well as how it is maintained by the (family) system, in order to design intervention strategies that reduce the presenting problem.**

**Despite a growing diversity in theoretical orientations, efforts have been made, and continue to be made, for a construction of a comprehensive or integrative family systems theory. For instance, Nichols and Everett have constructed an integrative theory of family therapy that draws from the three theoretical orientations presented above. They have also included in their theory some psychodynamic insights in order to construct a wholistic and comprehensive theory (to be used in clinical practice) that would better address issues that hinder people from living fulfilling lives. Their integrated systemic approach provides a framework for thinking in dynamic, systemic, and existential terms. Their effort in presenting an integrated systemic approach is based on their belief that no single theory or school of family therapy can claim superiority over other theories in terms of clinical effectiveness. An integration is needed to bring the best of each theory to bear upon the assessment, understanding, and dealing with people's problems and difficulties in living.**

**This dissertation affirms this position. That is why I will be drawing insights from the three theories selected, by exploring how they can best be used as a tool for the ministry of pastoral care and counseling that speaks to the issues raised by African feminist theologians.**

**However, as I indicated earlier, there must be a process that critically explores the applicability of family systems theory from the perspective of African feminist theologians. This way, this work will avoid the trap of trying to apply uncritically a theory that originated in European and North American contexts to African problems.**

Critical study of family systems theory will provide us with insights as to what notions will need to be refined before the three systemic trends selected can be applied to the African problems presented in this dissertation.

### Critiques of and Responses to Family Systems Theory and African Women's Theology

There are many theorists who have analyzed and critiqued not only family systems theory per se but also its use in general, as well as its clinical applications with various populations. These theorists include, but are not limited to, Michael Nichols, J. Manuel Casas, Monica McGoldrick et al., Annette Brodsky, Michele Bograd, Debora A. Luepnitz, and Nancy Boyd-Franklin.

Michael Nichols, in his book *The Self in the System: Expanding the Limits of Family Therapy*,<sup>72</sup> decries the neglect of the individual in family systems theory. Nichols finds the systems approach's focus on the system as overly abstract and lacking. He argues that family theory has moved too far from the psychology of the individual, so much so that it has found the family by losing the individual. Nichols contends that there needs to be a reconciliation between systemic and intrapsychic approaches to assessing, understanding, and treating individuals, couples, and families. Such a reconciliation, Nichols pursues, will enable family systems theory to take into account both individual and family dynamics, with clear ideas about the individual's contribution to family interaction. The self needs to be taken back into the system.

Nichols' critique is very important as I explore the use of family systems theory in an African context. His critique of systemic family theory resonates with African feminist critique of the African family and society, namely, its emphasis on what Oduyoye has called "corporate personality" to the neglect and detriment of the individual. So, it is crucial to keep in mind how an uncritical application of family systems theory in

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Nichols, *The Self in the System: Expanding the Limits of Family Therapy* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987).

African contexts could contribute to the very suffering that African women's theology, and this dissertation, seek to alleviate.

Likewise, McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano observe that although family-centered approaches have gained wide acceptance in the helping professions for solving problems and treating emotional or interpersonal disturbances or conflicts, these theories have failed to include in their analyses issues pertaining to race, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>73</sup> Picking up on this critique, Casas goes on to say that not only do family systems theories ignore race, ethnicity, and culture as they apply to families, but more than that, even the understanding of the family prevalent in these theories is basically assumed to be the Euro-American white family.<sup>74</sup> He suggests that a much broader understanding of the family, with an awareness of the cultural specificity of each family configuration, needs to be articulated when one is working and dealing with people of other ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. Included in this critique is the argument that family theories also focus on the problems of the Euro-American white middle-class family, and these theories reflect the male-oriented, Euro-American status quo of U.S culture. Adding to this critique, Casas underscores the fact that family systems theories have not seriously considered in their analyses the realms of history and culture. Thus, "by limiting their analyses, family theories fall short of a thorough social critique and thus provide a basis for protecting the status quo."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Monica McGoldrick, John Pearce, and Joseph Giordano, eds. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1982).

<sup>74</sup> J. Manuel Casas, "Counseling and Psychotherapy with Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups in Theory and Practice," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychotherapy*, ed., Bongar and Beutler, 326.

<sup>75</sup> Casas, 326.

McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano's critique of family systems theory is helpful in reinforcing our awareness of the issues of gender inequalities and power differentials in family and church, as well as sensitizing us to how we apply systemic family theory in addressing these issues. Casas' critique is particularly helpful in that it helps us to be mindful and aware of the cultural uniqueness of each family, and how each cultural and historical context shapes relationship patterns and issues, as well as how to approach them for caring purposes. There is no one model of caring that fits all situations, especially across cultures.

Annette Brodsky and Susan Steinberg provide a feminist critique of family systems theories.<sup>76</sup> They decry the fact that, in family systems theories, women and men are treated as if they have equal power within the family. Brodsky and Steinberg denounce this and other assumptions and illusions that hold that women and men have equal status at home and in the family. They rebuke the lack of recognition of gender inequality in the theory, as well as the incorrect view that women and men are equally responsible for dysfunctional dynamics even when one is being victimized or abused. They denounce an assumption that oppression is mutually regulated between oppressor and oppressed. Brodsky and Steinberg go on to say that this view neglects the historical factors that are responsible for shaping oppressive types of interaction, as well as "political factors outside of the family that keep it in place."<sup>77</sup> In their opinion, "this circular form of causality proposed by family systems theory can be a form of blaming the victim."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Annette Brodsky and Susan Steinberg, "Psychotherapy with Women in Theory and Practice," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychotherapy*, ed. Bongar and Beutler, 304.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

As I indicated earlier, some concepts and notions will need to be refined before they can be applied to an African situation. Circular causality is one of them. The assumption, for example, that women and men have equal responsibility for promoting dysfunctional relational patterns is very problematic, *and* it runs against the huge amount of evidence that shows how women are actively struggling to dismantle the monster of patriarchy and male-domination, and the resistance they encounter. Equally problematic is the assumption that oppression is mutually regulated by both oppressor and oppressed. There is a strong reaction to such views in the African feminist literature considered in this dissertation. Therefore, it behooves us to be very aware of the possibility that the systems perspective, when applied uncritically, could reinforce certain oppressive cultural beliefs and practices that this dissertation argues ought to be eradicated.

Finally, Nancy Boyd-Franklin makes an analysis of the cultural context of African-American families, as well as a critical examination of the relevance of major family therapy approaches, which leads her to the development of a multisystems approach she deems fitting for the treatment of Black families.<sup>79</sup> Her theory is based on the fact that the familial structures of Black families are significantly different from Euro-American families; the diversity of familial structures in the Black communities is even greater than one might expect. Her consideration of issues of gender differentiation and the socialization process of Black women and Black men, as well as socio-economic issues, among other things, leads her to the elaboration of a multisystems approach to the treatment of Black families and their problems.

Boyd-Franklin's work, especially her methodology, demonstrates how to apply systemic family theory to African problems. Following Boyd-Franklin's lead, issues of gender differentiation, the socialization of African men and women, and socio-economic problems that affect both men and women must be very present in our consciousness as

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<sup>79</sup> See Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: A Multisystems Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989).



we explore the use of systemic notions as a tool for pastoral care and counseling in African contexts. Her discussion of the diversity of familial structures in the Black communities in the U.S. is also helpful as we consider family structures and relational patterns in an African setting.

One of the critiques of African women's analysis of gender relations in the African family is their tendency to generalize what constitutes African family life. African women theologians tend to speak of the African family as a unitary and uniform organism. That is, African women theologians are inclined to generalize observations of gender issues and patterns from one context to the whole of Africa. The way they discuss the notion of *the African family* seems to convey the idea that all families in Africa display the same relational patterns and dynamics, and struggle with the same issues, as far as gender goes. While they recognize the uniqueness of different settings in which they live and write (i.e., urban, rural, traditional, and contemporary contexts), they fail to distinguish most clearly the specificity of women's experience in urban and/or rural areas, for example, and to specifically point out how women's experiences may differ within these settings. Such failure to recognize the diversity of gender experiences and related relational dynamics, or more concretely, overlooking the differences in gender experiences between the urban and the rural settings, leads to the neglect of significant diversity among African families. Such neglect of intra-cultural diversity would limit pastoral effectiveness in challenging the unquestionably ubiquitous problems in gender relations in African contexts. Intra-cultural diversity is a reality that needs to be reckoned with, so as to avoid deadening generalizations. I will expand a bit this idea in my observations and critique of African women's discourse on the African family in Chapter 3 and when I discuss the case study in Chapter 6. The discussion of areas for further research in Chapter 7 will also emphasize the importance of recognizing and affirming intra-cultural diversity as it pertains to family life and relationship patterns.

### Contribution of the Dissertation

First and foremost, this dissertation brings gender relations from the margins to the center of African pastoral theological reflection and concern. Second, it places African feminist theological perspectives on the values that regulate gender relations and family life at the heart of the dialogue between family systems theory, African contexts, and pastoral theology, care, and counseling. As such, it introduces the theological genre called African women's theology to scholars and practitioners in the discipline of pastoral theology, care, and counseling.

Third, this dissertation's analysis of family systems theory and its application to gender issues in African contexts, as defined by African feminist theology, represents an important contribution to the literature in pastoral theology that integrates psychological insights and the Christian theological tradition for a better understanding of human beings, their relationships, and pastoral practice. This integration is done in such a way that pastoral theology, while being informed in part by psychology, is not "choked by it," to use Hans Küng's phrase.<sup>80</sup> That is to say, this integration values psychological theory and yet maintains clear theological content to guide pastoral action and practice.<sup>81</sup>

Fourth, this dissertation introduces systemic family theory to pastors and pastoral caregivers as a tool and framework for doing ministry with persons and families dealing with gender conflicts, or simply persons and families in distress and transition. It provides categories of analysis, assessment, and intervention, as well as a theological perichoretic framework from which to conceptualize and practice pastoral care that is

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<sup>80</sup> Hans Küng, *The Theologian and the Church*, trans. Cecily Hastings (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 14.

<sup>81</sup> I believe that a critical attention to the psychological understanding of the human being and what is required for his or her healing and fulfillment is essential in pastoral theology. It is also essential that attention to psychology not lead us to the loss of our groundedness in the Christian theological tradition that sets the parameters, directions, and finalities for Christian pastoral care and counseling.

truly prophetic and gives rise to life. Fifth, this dissertation fosters an intercultural dialogue between some Western views of relationship and family life with African thought systems--a dialogue necessary in the increasingly multicultural and "small world" in which we live.

Sixth, this dissertation encourages the development of cultural and gender sensitivity in pastoral care, counseling, and general ministry with people of different cultural backgrounds by using culture and gender as lenses through which to evaluate human relationships in their optimal or dysfunctional manifestations. And finally, this dissertation will advance the study of the African family and church, and contribute to cross-cultural studies and understandings of these.

### **Chapter Outlines**

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter defines the problem to be addressed. This is done by discussing briefly the peripheral nature of gender as a category of analysis in African pastoral theology and care. More specifically, I indicate in this chapter that African pastoral theologians and pastoral psychologists who have considered family systems theory in their work do not address gender issues in their consideration of family systems theory as a tool for pastoral care and counseling in African contexts. In addition, the first chapter presents a brief thematic review and analysis of African feminist theological perspectives on gender relations in the family, church and society. Further, a brief discussion of family systems theory provides the knowledge of the wider theoretical context within which the three trends selected are located. An examination of some critiques of family systems theory and African women's theology provides insights for our constructive work and suggestion of family systems theory as a tool for effective and gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling in African settings.

Chapters 2 and 3 will build on the brief thematic review of African feminist theology done in Chapter 1 by focusing specifically on relational and gender dynamics

within the family and the church, respectively. The emphasis will be upon pointing out what African feminist theologians consider to be oppressive elements in culture, religion, and tradition. The discouragement of women to individualize and differentiate, as well as the emphasis on corporate personality and its ramifications will be considered. The social, educational, and economic constraints that restrict women's participation in family, church, and society will be analyzed. Some supportive African feminist social scientific studies on gender relations and women's status will be used to strengthen and corroborate assertions by African feminist theologians.

In Chapter 4, I will extend the discussion of systemic family theory done in the first chapter by focusing on the three schools selected for the purpose of this dissertation. I will demonstrate, on the basis of the issues and concerns raised by African women's theology, and through the analysis of the major systemic concepts that family systems theory's focus on the differentiation of the self, the distribution of power in the family or relational unit and issues of boundaries, and the centrality of relational ethics in marital and family relations, among other things, indicates family systems theory's usefulness for sensitive pastoral responses to African women's concerns. I will demonstrate that family systems theory provides us with categories of analysis, assessment, and intervention that can be useful in our concern and care for gender relations in African settings.

Chapter 5 will provide a pastoral theological analysis of both African women's theology and family systems theory. These two schools of thought and practice will be compared and contrasted with a focus on how these two frames of reference may inform pastoral caregiving that truly promotes human personhood and community supportive of both women and men. It is here that I will propose that the theological concept of perichoresis (the notion that describes relations of mutuality and reciprocity within the triune God), in conjunction with African women's theology and family systems theory, provides an evocative image for gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling.

**Chapter 6 will consider the implications of an integrated examination of African women's theology, family systems theory, and the theological image of perichoresis for the life of the church and for the practice of pastoral care and counseling. This discussion will be followed by a case illustration of how to utilize the resources of African women's theology, family systems theory, and the theological notion of perichoresis in situations of gender injustice and oppression.**

**Chapter 7 will present a summary of the basic ideas discussed in this study, followed by specific recommendations for continued strategizing in order to address the problems in gender relations identified by African women theologians. These recommendations are offered in the hope that we will achieve greater gender awareness and changed behaviors in African churches, families, and societies. I also provide a discussion of some areas for further research uncovered by this study.**

## CHAPTER 2

### African Women's Theology: Gender Dynamics in the Family

#### Introduction and General Considerations

In this chapter I will explore the relational and gender dynamics in the African family. This examination will focus on what the Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology have identified as oppressive elements in culture, religion, and African traditions.<sup>1</sup> Sociocultural, educational, and economic constraints that restrict women's participation in family, church, and society at large will also be considered. Further, I will point out that African feminist theologians have also identified, examined, and discussed liberative elements and life-giving resources in certain African traditions, values, and norms that regulate relational events and human interactions, and I will consider these.

The discussion of liberative elements in African traditions is important because African feminist theologians are not only critical of oppressive elements in African cultures and religions; they also engage in uncovering some positive traditional values, norms, and practices that can contribute to their efforts toward a more humane living for both women and men. As such, they engage in a comprehensive search for resources for the empowerment of individuals, the transformation of oppressive gender relations in the family, and the renewal of community, from the very sources they critique. African women's theology's way of engaging African cultures and traditions seems to be promising and, indeed, contributive to the critical dialogue needed between the Christian faith or tradition, and African traditional religions. Some indigenous African theological programs have been critiqued as romanticizing African cultures and the African past. African women theologians avoid this tendency. They do not do theology for "African ancestors" (i.e., those who lived in the African past), though they respect and value the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa."

role of the African past to shed light on the theological task. Mindful of the realities of the contemporary African world, and the needs and experiences of African women and men, the theology of African women seeks to construct a theology that meets the needs of the contemporary African person by adopting a critical perspective toward African culture and religion.

It is important to note that while I organize Chapters 2 and 3 thematically, the discussion of issues mostly follows a serial consideration of African women theologians (and other African feminists in the social sciences). This choice of style lends itself to repetition and restatement of ideas already mentioned in previous sections. That is to say, I intentionally use, at some points, repetition and slight variations in content to reiterate the conspicuous and pervasive nature of the gender issues African women theologians identify in different geographical and social contexts and, by highlighting individual theologians and the social locations/countries they represent, to show how each author specifically strengthens the capacity to address gender issues as a pastoral theological imperative in Africa.

Further, the repetition here serves several other functions: to address the denial that certain African traditions present problems in gender relations; and to reinforce and nurture the commitment of those women (and men) who are working to dismantle oppressive gender structures that marginalize women and, in the process, diminish both women and men. It is important to note that the style of communication described above is located in African traditions and liturgical methods that consider and value restatements and repetitions as a way to highlight the importance, seriousness, and truth of the issues being discussed.

Over the past twenty years or so, an increasing body of literature has been written by African women on theological issues, using women's experiences as a main source for

theological reflection and construction in African settings.<sup>2</sup> In September 1989, African women theologians organized themselves into what they call "The Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology." The initial convocation of this organization was held in September 1989 in Accra, Ghana. The Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology is now organized into four main groups according to criteria such as language and geographical location, among others. There is an English-speaking West-Africa group, an Eastern Africa group, a Southern Africa group, and a French-speaking West and Central Africa group. This organization has become a milestone in the development, growth, and promotion of African women's theology throughout the continent and abroad. While African women theologians embrace African culture as one of the bases for their theological enterprises, they nevertheless demand a critical consideration of African culture so as to pinpoint and challenge those aspects of African culture deemed to be prohibitive of women's flourishing and participation. This critical assessment of African culture and religious practices is based on the lived experiences of women in family, church, and society. As such, African women's theology gives priority to women's issues as they deal with women's status in the larger African context.

However, it should be noted that African women theologians are not indifferent to issues that affect men, and/or society in general. In fact, they view their theological concerns as being connected to the well-being of the larger community of women and men. Thus, in addition to their special foci, African women in theology see themselves as being "involved in the struggles of their male counterparts and share some common concern[s] with them."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, African women in theology see themselves as being

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<sup>2</sup> Amoah, "Theology from the Perspective of African Women," 1; Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (Nov. 1997): 68-76; Nyambura Njoroge, "The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (Nov. 1997): 77-83.

<sup>3</sup> Amoah, "Theology from the Perspective of African Women," 1.



affected by issues that their male counterparts have been addressing all along, namely: racism, poverty, social, economic, and political problems with all their ramifications in society. A serious student of African women's theology would recognize that they do, indeed, include these issues in their theological work as well. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye puts it,

[arising] out of women's experience, our theology is keenly contextual, taking into account religion, culture, and socioeconomic and political developments in Africa. Living has no boundaries, but in doing theology we have called attention to *religion* and *culture* as facets of life making the most impact on women in Africa. They also enable us to see the whole, as Africa's economic, political, and societal developments are all imbued with religion and infused with religious beliefs and practices.<sup>4</sup>

We need to add here that it is this context of women's experience that motivates African women theologians to research and write on African culture from a multiplicity of cultural lenses within the African context.

At any rate, the above excerpt clearly indicates that African women's theology is not concerned with women's issues in isolation from other issues that affect the setting in which they live. Rather, we see here that their concern is holistic and has wholeness as its goal. What makes this concern for wholeness theological is its groundedness in African women's faith in the God who is interested in the well-being of all human beings, and even more so, those who are oppressed. For African women theologians, improvement in women's conditions is believed to have systemic effects on other aspects of life, including collective life. It is believed that by improving women's situations, society as a whole will also be enriched by women's fuller participation. Women's

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<sup>4</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "African Feminist Theology," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 113 (original emphasis).

presence and full involvement will bring about a new consciousness that views individual experience of oppression and marginalization as linked to contextual issues of collective political and economic oppression. In this line of thought, change in the collective experience cannot happen without change in the personal experience. To be consistent with the tradition of resistance exemplified by the struggle for independence in the 1950's and 1960's, there should be a concern for the freedom and liberation of all aspects of life-including the personal and the communal. Without a doubt, this vision is wholistic, and it requires the attention of the church as a whole. Their wholistic approach is also evidenced by their methodology and resources for their theological enterprise. Oduyoye writes:

Resources for [African women's] theology are found in traditional sources for Christian studies, but in addition, African women theologians delve into African cultural history, religion, and the sources of spirituality available to Africans. Scriptures are not limited to Christian sources and include the language of oracles, prayers, symbols, and rites of Africa's combined religion and culture. While we research the Bible, we do not overlook the need to review the traditional interpretations of Africa's own spiritual resources.<sup>5</sup>

The interest in the various materials of spirituality available to Africans, including women's experience, as sources for the theological enterprise, renders African women's theology deeply relevant to a broad-based population of potential beneficiaries. Further, the methodology of African women's theology has a unique quality in that they seek to intentionally include perspectives of women who belong to non-Christian faith traditions such as Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Such an approach positions African women's theology to have a broad influence as it seeks to be informed by as many

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<sup>5</sup> Oduyoye, "African Feminist Theology," 113.

women's experiences as possible, and reach out to as many women as it can, in order to exert a greater influence on the broader context in which women live. For example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye's well-researched and documented book on the situations of African women in West Africa demonstrates how African women's theology draws from a variety of sources to address women's situations in African culture and religion.<sup>6</sup> She uses myths, proverbs, sayings, (traditional) songs, and the Christian tradition to examine women's experiences and set forth an agenda indicative of the new kind of cultural and faith practices she would like to see implemented in church and the larger society. This will be seen more clearly when we discuss her work and the work of other African women theologians in a detailed fashion later in this chapter and the next. Let us now turn to the examination of prevailing themes in African women's theological writings, and their perspectives on gender relations in the African family and society.

### **Gender Dynamics in the African Family and Society**

#### **Preliminary Remarks**

This chapter addresses the question: What are gender dynamics in the African family and society? I will approach this question by isolating and discussing some of the recurring themes in African women's theological literature that reveal problems in gender relations in the African family and church. In my analysis, I will discuss the nature of gender dynamics in the family and the value of African feminist analysis and observations. A discussion of some limitations of African women's observations on gender problems, both in the family and the church, will be offered toward the end of Chapter 3.

Again, I draw on selected themes to organize this chapter. But the selection and discussion are not exhaustive. The themes selected seem to be the most prominent in the

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<sup>6</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*.

writings of African women theologians. The following themes are discussed in relation to gender problems in the African family and society: the male domination of family relations, cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood, violence against women and children, discrimination in education and economics, unequal distribution of work in the household, gender factors in women's mental health, and the neglect of women's individuality.

I illustrate each theme with examples from women theologians who have written and discussed the issues involved in a particular theme. I note that each theme presents unique challenges to the family and to the church, as we shall see later in chapter 3. At some points this discussion reads like a serial presentations of individual theologians, and one may note some repetition in my discussion of the issues. As mentioned above, this is intentional.

### **Recurring Themes**

#### **Male domination of family relations**

African women theologians affirm with Carol Riphenburg, a social scientist, that "[African cultures], generally, operate in the advantage of men who are socialized to dominate family relations and structures."<sup>7</sup> There exists a state of unbalanced power relations which operates as male members of the family assume positions of privilege—even in matrilineal societies.

In her article "Women's Status and Cultural Expression: Changing Gender Relations and Structural Adjustment in Zimbabwe" cited above, Riphenburg discusses gender dynamics in the Zimbabwean family by pointing out the existence of unequal gender relations and the impact of this state of things on women's education, health, control of sexuality, and cultural expression. She states: "The traditional structure of the

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<sup>7</sup> Riphenburg, 33. See also Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 1-15; Oduyoye and Kanyoro, ed., *Will to Arise*.

Zimbabwean family makes it difficult for women to obtain the authority and resources they need during times of economic strain. Male-headed families are the ideal family model in Zimbabwe. Within these families, the male has ultimate decision-making power. He controls all forms of property--including his wife, who in some groups is also regarded as his possession.”<sup>8</sup> Congolese sociologist Gertrude Mianda has also observed that while there are men and women critics who question male domination in the Congolese society, “both the female and male discourses are conservative vis-à-vis the image of woman and avoid the question of order established by men in the Congolese society.”<sup>9</sup> The critiques do not question the unequal gender relations in the Congolese society, but simply denounce the sexual exploitation of women under the Mobutu regime. Mianda quotes a statement of the late President Mobutu to indicate the Congolese society’s view of gender relations in the family:

There will always be a boss in each household. Until proven otherwise, the boss in our society is the one who wears pants/trousers. Our women will need to understand and accept this with a smile and a revolutionary submission.<sup>10</sup>

While a statement by Mobutu must not be generalized to be representative of the whole Congolese society’s view of the distribution of power between women and men in families, it, nevertheless, reflects at least the struggle by some African men to maintain male domination in the family and society. Mobutu’s statement was intended to *enforce* among Congolese women and men that it is the cultural norm for women to hold a secondary place in relation to their male counterparts, and that it is therefore appropriate

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<sup>8</sup> Riphenburg, 34.

<sup>9</sup> See Gertrude Mianda, “Dans l’ombre de la ‘démocratie’ au Zaïre: La remise en question de l’émancipation Mobutiste de la femme” (In the shadow of “democracy” in Zaire: Questioning Mobutu’s program for women’s emancipation), *Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines* 29, no. 1 (1995): 51-78 (translation mine).

<sup>10</sup> Mianda, “Dans l’ombre de la ‘democratie’ au Zaïre,” 65 (translation mine).

and acceptable to maintain the power imbalance and advantage of men over women, for men to have a prominent place in the family, and for women to be pleased with a secondary position.

Riphenburg makes similar remarks about the cultural preferences for male preeminence in the family in the Zimbabwean society. She indicates that there exists a gender ideology that justifies the male domination of family relations and notes that these male privileges are based on the fact that male-dominated families are the desired structures of family organization. This means, therefore, that families which are headed by females are viewed as lacking and undesirable. This value is held despite the fact that female-headed families and single parents families are on the rise in Zimbabwe. Riphenburg observes: "Female-headed single-parent families are on the increase in Zimbabwe, as in the developing world at large. A female-headed household that resulted from the death of the male spouse is respected in Zimbabwean society. By contrast, society tends to view a female-headed family as a result of divorce or unmarried status as a social failure."<sup>11</sup> As we shall see below, this pre-eminence of males in the family is inimical to women's and girls' development and growth, as it limits their opportunities for self-realization and self-fulfillment.

#### Cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood

Another theme that is prominent in African women's theology is the cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood. Women are expected to marry and stay married. Failure to do so can be indicative of some kind of deviation from the expectations of society. As Riphenburg and other women scholars note, marriage and

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<sup>11</sup> Riphenburg, 35.

motherhood are viewed as the ultimate career for women. Societal expectations exert pressure for *all* women to marry and stay married, even at great personal costs. The expectation to marry is followed by the cultural prescription to procreate, to be a mother. African women theologians take issue with this cultural image that confines women's experience and possibilities to marriage and motherhood. They view this as a distortion of African women's true image. It is important to note that African women theologians affirm marriage and motherhood as possibilities for women. But they decry the excessive value placed on female attachment to males, through marriage, and on reproductive abilities.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, African women theologians affirm womanhood in all its diversity: single women, married women, single mothers, married mothers, wife, etc. They view all these, and more, as aspects of womanhood that represent possibilities for women, and not requirements or simply deviations from cultural standards. Thus, they challenge prevailing assumptions and expectations about womanhood and insist that women are to be affirmed, in the family and the church, in the choice they make for their lives. The affirmation of marriage and motherhood must not be viewed as a promotion of one path that all women must follow. Women, like men, have before them many possibilities and choices that meet their aspirations and desires. Families and churches must support these because it is their responsibility to nurture and support their members in their processes of growth. The challenges of Mercy Oduyoye, who writes from a West African perspective, are worth discussing here. They recapture some of the issues we have already discussed above, and our consideration of her insights here reinforces the

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<sup>12</sup> Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community," 71.

seriousness with which African women theologians confront cultural expectations that distort women's images.

Oduyoye contends that the traditions that promote the image of fulfilled and "mature" women as those who are married and have children are prevalent among the Akan and Yoruba of West Africa. These traditions must be corrected or discarded. She challenges the culture that grants status to women mostly in relation to marriage and children. For her, such a culture perpetuates suffering on the part of those women who do not have children, by choice or by nature. It also makes marriage compulsory, with one thing in mind--reproduction. The sense of companionship is missing in such an understanding of marriage and family life. Oduyoye, like her feminist counterparts, decries such practices. In fact, she challenges the fact that marriage and motherhood still remain the "only acceptable state of women" in most African contexts. Such beliefs and values in the family and church promote male domination and female subordination. What Oduyoye has not said here is that the expectation to marry, have a family, and reproduce does not only apply to women. In African tradition, both men and women are expected to "perpetuate the family" so to speak. In this sense, the expectation to marry affects both women and men. But Oduyoye is right in indicating that in most instances, it seems that marriage is something that mostly benefits men more than it does women.

Oduyoye comments:

The Akan male sees marriage as a means of obtaining service and warmth from his wife and children during his lifetime, burial by his children when he dies, and mourning by his wife or wives at his demise. Marriage enables the Akan woman to channel the ancestors back to life, to continue to obtain spiritual protection for her children (which is said to be provided by males only) to aid her matrikin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 147.



The above description of the intent of marriage from a male's perspective seems to be profit/benefit driven. According to Oduyoye, the Akan male engages in marriage to guarantee his future comfort and security. His wife becomes a means of bringing back the ancestors to life. In this sense, she is not only in service for her husband, but also for the whole family in that she becomes a "conduit" through which the ancestors perpetuate the lineage and, as such, connect with the offspring.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, one can clearly see in the above description what Oduyoye has called the "pitfalls for the well-being of women." For her, women's sense of self seems to be lost in the interests of others. Women's interests are not mentioned as part of the marriage deal. Here, a woman's dignity and sense of worthiness seems to be tied to the roles ascribed to her by the culture. And she lives to fulfill those roles. The only apparent advantage for the woman seems to be economic security. However, Oduyoye contends that marriage continues to hold sway over women even if economic security is no longer provided; and this is what African feminist theologians are questioning. She states:

In any case, a widow, whether Akan or Yoruba, does not stand to inherit her deceased husband's property. The Yoruba woman benefits from the spouse's estate through her son, and is taken care of by either her daughters or her daughters-in-law. If she is childless, though, a widow falls to the bottom line of the litany of the African wives' woes, with no one to care for her. However, this will happen only if she opts for a divorce; otherwise, tradition stipulates that she be taken care of by her husband's relations.<sup>15</sup>

Here is another injustice that Oduyoye, like her counterparts, is challenging. The norms governing inheritance are not in favor of women. The fact that women do not have direct access to their husband's property is problematic, given the reality that they have

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note here that it is commonly believed in Africa that new born babies are the ancestors coming back to life to ensure the continuation of their extended families; for a discussion of some aspects of this, see, for example, John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991); and Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 151.

provided support and "warmth," as stated above, to their husband throughout the whole process of acquiring ownership of property. For women to have access to this property only through their children (which is through the back door, so to speak) points to the existence of unequal gender relations and oppressive practices towards women. The obvious question is, why can't women have the right to inherit the property of someone they loved and with whom they shared life? The tradition makes provision for the widow to be supported through children. This is a big assumption, one that assumes that biological motherhood (or fatherhood for that matter) is the lot of every woman (or man). When this is not the case, the question poses itself: What about those who have not had children? The issues of childlessness also impact women's lives, especially in relationship to economic and material security, among other things. This means that if a woman does not have children, she will not have a chance to benefit from her husband's wealth or belongings. We need to note here, in passing, that Oduyoye, and some of her counterparts, do not make it clear if their descriptions of women's status in situations of loss of husband, or of marriage in general, indicate present realities, or recount historical practices that no longer hold. This is one of the limitations of most African women theologians' analysis of women's situations in culture and religion. The analysis of some traditional practices, which may or may not still be observed, is generalized into descriptions of African women's status in contemporary Africa. I will discuss further my critique of the theological analysis of gender relations by African women toward the end of this chapter. But, suffice it to say here that it would have been helpful for Oduyoye, and other African women theologians, to point out the difference between the African past, and contemporary Africa, as well as the differences between socio-economic classes, women's and men's levels of education, and the differences between urban and rural realities, in their descriptions of the situations and experiences of women.

At any rate, Oduyoye indicates that the laws governing inheritance are benevolent and humanitarian in that they give provision for the care of widows and the support of

those who are vulnerable after the structures that used to provide security have collapsed through loss of a husband, and the like. For example, "among the Yoruba, a widow who is very old stays on in her husband's house as an honorary wife and can expect the protection and means of sustenance justly due her for having spent her youth serving her husband and his family."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Oduyoye argues that "[despite] this implied benevolence toward widows, the fact remains that the woman is imaged as a minor who must be protected and provided for by males, be they from her maternal relations or her husband's house."<sup>17</sup> Thus, she views such an image of the woman as one that promotes male domination and female subordination. Hence she calls women genuinely to seek freedom from these kinds of "cultural fetters," whether or not one is attached to men as wife, sister, mother, aunt, and more. While I agree with Oduyoye's analysis, I also wonder if her reading of these traditional practices through her "contemporary" eyes and experiences do not miss the goals of the practices she critiques. I do not think that the "benevolence toward widows" necessarily belittles women, given the socioeconomic context in which it was practiced. The well-being of widows seems to have been the motivating factor in the conceptualization of these practices. I wonder if the cultural provision to protect and support widows does not reflect the biblical image of God as the Helper of those in need, and the mandate for God's people to mirror God's concerns in their practices in community. The Psalmist, for example, asks God "to give justice to the weak [which includes widows in the biblical tradition] and to "lift the needy [again includes widows] from the ash heap."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Pss. 82: 3 and 113: 7. All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Nonetheless, there is more to Oduyoye's appraisal of African culture. While she is very critical of specific aspects of African culture, her analysis points to the resources within the African tradition that can empower and strengthen women in their struggle for gender equality. Thus, she goes on to note that there were provisions within the traditions not only for the protection of women, but also for their involvement, participation, and contribution to the well-being of the larger community. She argues that among the Akan, and even the Yoruba, there were structures that made it possible for women to express their concerns, and voice their needs, to the attention of the whole community--especially to the leadership. Thus, she affirms that the tradition contained, and still does contain, liberative elements that can inspire women's struggle to effect the kind of changes they want to see happen within the family, church, and the larger society. Having made this remark, she goes on to assert that the neglect of these traditions which were in favor of women's needs and concerns was precipitated by the event of colonization, with its corollaries--the impact of the whole process of Westernization. Western patriarchal structures were implemented in African societies, building and strengthening the already existing male-dominated systems on the continent. She states:

Practices involving marriage--its validation, the flexible location of marriage partners, childbearing, and severance of marriage contract--have all been impacted by Westernization. None has been simplified by this incursion and in none of the areas have national governments been able to regulate practices at the national level by legislation. In all of these areas, however, one aspect draws my attention--the outcome of these practices on the independence and autonomy of women. Traditional norms are enforced whenever they serve to silence women, reduce or eliminate their voices. My observation is that these traditional systems have been strengthened by Western structures as national governments and institutions have been formed.<sup>19</sup>

This quote reveals in part women's concerns and programs, at least to this reader. I see here Oduyoye saying that traditional norms regulating marital, family, and social life

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<sup>19</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 151.

were not totally neglectful of women's issues--and especially women's well-being. The tradition made provisions to ensure that cultural practices and expectations would not be in favor of one group to the neglect or exclusion of the other (even though male domination was unquestionably asserted in most community structures as African women theologians indicate). The task, then, for the church, is to sift through the traditional stipulations and/or regulations with the goal of uncovering those aspects that promote the well-being of all members of the human community. This includes setting aside "church values" and practices that reinforce the silencing and the marginalization of women. African women theologians have already shown the way, and it is about time that we follow their lead.

#### Gender factors in women's mental health

African women theologians, and African feminist social scientists, contend that many of the dearly held cultural values regulating gender relations and sex roles are contributing to women's oppression and to the diminishment of their well-being. In her study on gender factors in women's mental health in West Africa, Mere Kisekka points out two sets of stressful events for African women. "One set of factors flows out of the traditional cultural values, taboos and prescriptions which are inimical to women's self-concept as well as physical health. The second set of factors revolves around structural changes resulting from the modernization processes which have marginalized women and reaped them disbenefits."<sup>20</sup> Kisekka goes on to identify what she calls "culturally stressful psycho-social factors," especially in the area of sex and reproduction. She notes

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<sup>20</sup> Mere Kisekka, "Gender and Mental Health in Africa," in *Women's Mental Health in Africa*, ed. Esther D. Rothblum and Ellen Cole (New York: Haworth Press, 1990), 6.

that certain culturally based sexual practices such as clitoridectomy and infibulation do generate a lot of problems for African women involving physical and psychological threat to their well-being. Kisekka mentions problems such as genital infections leading to infertility and severe problems at childbirth as well as lack of sexual response. In terms of reproduction, Kisekka notes that there is an excessive stigma attached to barrenness, even though there exists an alternative option of child fostering. She comments:

Both traditional and modern folklore, literature and popular music are replete with depictions of barren women as lonely, malicious, cruel to children and always coveting and bewitching other peoples' children. The modern alternative of attaining social and emotional fulfillment through career aspirations is, understandably, as yet utopian to the majority of women. It is therefore not surprising that barren women tend to feature prominently in the supernaturalistic roles of diviners and prophetesses.<sup>21</sup>

While Kisekka points out the increasing evidences of sexual harassment in schools and workplaces (by colleagues and bosses) as another source of stress and psychological distress, her main assertion is that psychological stress and strain is induced by certain cultural practices and belief systems which restrict women's possibilities and require too much from them.<sup>22</sup> There are also socio-economic factors which precipitate the onset of stressful events in women's lives leading to psychological

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6-7; see also Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community." The work of African male theologians John Mbiti and Bénézet Bujo, mentioned above, affirm the predicament of barren women in African traditional societies.

<sup>22</sup> Theologian Daisy Nwachuku's research among the Anangs, Ibidiós, Igbos, and Ngembas of Nigeria and Cameroon reveals many of these issues raised by Kisekka. See Daisy Nwachuku, "Cultural and Psycho-Social Roots of Violence Against Women and Children in Selected African Milieux," in *Pastoral Theology's and Pastoral Psychology's Contributions to Helping Heal a Violent World*, ed. G. Michael Cordner (Surakarta, Indonesia: Intl. Pastoral Care Network for Social Responsibility, 1996), 222.

discomfort. These will be discussed later in this chapter. Overall, Kisseka concludes that the degradation of women's mental health results from an aggregate of cultural values and practices. These are important observations Kisekka makes about how specific cultural practices contribute to the deterioration of African women's physical and mental health. Her work uncovers some oppressive elements in African culture that need to be addressed and corrected. It is therefore important that pastors, pastoral caregivers, and counselors be aware of gender factors that affect women's health. They need to be familiarized with those traditional cultural values and practices that diminish women's well-being and cause psychological stress. Knowledge of the culturally stressful psychosocial factors will enable pastors, pastoral caregivers, and counselors to address not only the symptoms and their effects, but also the root causes of women's suffering. In so doing, they will be able to prevent unnecessary suffering, and thus, contribute to the health of gender relations as well.

However, there is a problem in some of the observations made about expectations of women's reproductive abilities, the stigma attached to barrenness, and the practice of clitoridectomy. Like with the cultural expectations about marriage and motherhood, these issues are discussed in general fashion, without saying if they were problems in the traditional society or issues in the contemporary African context. I will show at the end of this chapter that some of the issues that are generalized to the whole of Africa are not really problems in certain African contexts. Such is the issue of female infibulation and the practice of clitoridectomy. At any rate, pastors and pastoral counselors who work in places where these are still issues that affect and diminish women's well-being and health need to join in the efforts being made by African women theologians to discard aspects of

the cultural traditions that threaten women's health, cause unnecessary psychological stress, and create conflicts in gender relations.

#### **Unequal distribution of work in the household**

The unequal distribution of work between women and men is one of the major concerns of African women theologians. In fact, the women theologians contend that women and girls have a heavier workload than men and boys. The division of household work (and child care) is exploitative of women's services. Regardless of women's employment outside of the home, women do twice or three times more housework than their male counterparts. The same is true for girls in relation to boys. Therefore, they observe that this state of things has an impact on the education of girls and women.<sup>23</sup>

Ruth Besha, in her research conducted in Tanzania in the early 1990s on the status of women cites evidence of the existence of unequal distribution of work in the family. Her research found that women suffer under heavy workloads based on discriminatory traditions. These, in turn, generate problems related to issues of food security, child malnutrition, infant mortality, and much more. Besha writes:

Food security, high maternal and infant mortality rates and child malnutrition have become endemic problems everywhere, and no great progress is in view. Many reports have shown a very clear link between these problems and the unequal gender relations in society. Thus child malnutrition and infant mortality, especially in the rural areas, have often been linked not to lack of food--although that could be a contributing factor--but to the heavy workload of women.<sup>24</sup>

The link between women's heavy workloads, child malnutrition, infant mortality, and unequal gender relations point to the general issue of the unequal distribution of

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<sup>23</sup> We will expand on this aspect when we discuss the discrimination of women and girls in education.

<sup>24</sup> Besha, "Life of Endless Struggle," 55-56.



unpaid work in the family system--again, an issue of unequal family structure and inhibiting cultural values and practices discussed above. Other studies have shown that women who live in the rural areas are particularly affected by these realities in a deeper manner than their urban counterparts. This is due especially to the more significant lack of resources, education, and many other factors in rural areas. The issue of heavy workloads for women is indeed reflective of the existence of unequal gender relations and unequal distribution of power in the African family system.

Anne-Marie Mpundu has also noted that this is a big issue in Congolese families. She has coined the phrase *la femme aux six bras* (the woman with six hands) to describe the reality of women's excessive work based on the unequal distribution of work between women and men in Congolese families.<sup>25</sup> Mpundu argues that many women in the Congolese urban contexts have become providers for their families. This is due especially to the effects of war and the current economic crisis in which 90% of professionals and civil servants are either underpaid or not paid at all. This situation, according to Mpundu, has reinforced women's position in their role as *garant du bien-être familial* (that is worker or carer for family well-being). To fulfill this role, women engage in *le petit commerce* (that is trade activities or small businesses), sometimes in addition to their professional or other work outside of the house. It is these multiple activities by women that enable the family to make ends meet. Mpundu observes:

A woman who has spent almost her whole day working outside of the home, must also take care of her household when she returns home. Her husband and children are waiting for her, as well as numerous household chores. She must attend to all these tasks as adequately as she can. Her love for family takes precedence over herself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Anne-Marie Mpundu, *Droits et Promotion de la Femme* (Women's rights and the emancipation of women) (Kinshasa, Congo: Editions L'Epiphanie, 1996), (translation mine).

<sup>26</sup> Mpundu, 18 (translation mine).

Mpundu goes on to ask very important questions about women's development and growth. Given such a busy schedule, she wonders how a woman, at the end of the day, can really have energy *and* time for her own education and growth. With such a schedule and tasks to execute can a woman have time to read, listen to the radio, watch news on television? She answers no! Those are activities for others. They are activities for males. Mpundu concludes that women who live under such conditions find it difficult to engage even in leisure activities for their own enjoyment, growth, and self-fulfillment. They put their families before themselves and, in the process, lose themselves in the family. These women, according to Mpundu, are victims of unequal distribution of work between women and men in the family.

Indeed, efforts have been made, or are being made, by women and some men to acknowledge that there is a problem with the unequal distribution of work in the household based on gender and to improve women's conditions. But these efforts, Besha notes, have not yet changed African women's position in actual economic and social terms. In fact, there is a reluctance, according to Besha and other African women theologians, to acknowledge that there is a problem at all in regard to women's status in African societies; or when there is such recognition, the admission (that there is a problem) is often very grudging.<sup>27</sup>

Besha's analysis of women's situation in family and society led her to a conclusion that unequal gender relations still exist in African societies and that there is still a resistance to women's efforts to transform these unbalanced patterns of relating and dealing with people across gender lines—as exemplified by the unequal distribution of work in the family. She locates the lack of progress in, or resistance to, these efforts to economic and social factors, among other things. Besha insists that these economic and

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<sup>27</sup> Besha, "Life of Endless Struggle," 58.

social factors are the constraints that hinder *real* progress in women's efforts to bring about change. She observes:

The hindrances to real progress are both economic and social. From the very beginning, the economic problems of women have been emphasized. The dependence of women on their husbands or fathers was seen as the basis of their lowly position in society, so that if only women could be helped to be economically independent, most if not all of their problems would be over. There was a consistent call for women to involve themselves in "income-generating projects." Both governmental and non-governmental organizations spent a lot of resources on creating projects to put some cash into the hands of women. What has not always been appreciated is why these efforts had a limited impact on women's lives. The reasons usually given include the lack of involvement of the women in planning and executing projects, reliance on outside assistance and the small size of projects.<sup>28</sup>

But Besha argues that these development projects did not take into account the fact that women were already overworked, and they did not have enough time to get involved in these new developmental projects, while maintaining the domestic responsibility to cook and take care of the household needs. Besha even goes on to argue that the social constraints most women face are a bigger hindrance than the economic ones. The latter are simply fostered by long held patriarchal traditions (i.e., social constraints) which are promoted by patriarchal values that rule people's lives and order family relations. She comments:

When we look at the situation more closely, it all boils down to one fact: unequal gender relations still exist in our societies. While most researchers now generally agree that the economic problems women face are a consequence of the inequality which has rendered the women powerless to act, policy-makers, planners and even some women leaders are curiously reluctant to acknowledge that the social constraints women face are a bigger hindrance than the economic ones.<sup>29</sup>

Besha goes further to observe that it is not difficult to see why this is the case. For her the reason is clear: "Cultural norms and long-held traditions are very difficult to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 58.

change. Even after all the sensitization and awareness-building, one still hears women apologizing: 'but this is the tradition', 'the woman is expected to do these things, to behave in this way.'<sup>30</sup> Thus, she observes that this apologetic attitude has made changes very difficult to introduce. Besha points particularly to the way "patriarchal" values have become rooted in both women's and men's ways of relating, and how difficult it is to change the patterns that have been established by what one may call a "patriarchal consciousness" (my term). In relation to the family, she specifically argues that, "when we speak about gender inequality, about women suffering under heavy workloads and discriminatory traditions, we are talking of Christian women, about relations that exist in Christian families."<sup>31</sup> Thus, she argues that since patriarchal values are deeply rooted in the African Christian family, they cannot be changed without a concerted effort and deliberate action by the church and its leadership. In addition, Besha contends that as more women start to ask pertinent questions that relate to their experience and place in the family, church, and society, things will begin to change. Besha's discussion of patriarchal influences and how women are responding to this reality is worth quoting at some length:

Most of us come to accept the patriarchal relations that rule our lives almost as God-given. But it also seems that many people realize that changing social relationships will mean nothing less than a social revolution. When the majority of women, collectively or individually, start asking the relevant questions, the fabric of society, sewn tightly with the thread of women's subordination for so long, will inevitably be torn into pieces. Some of these relevant questions are: why should we do most of the work and reap the least benefit? Why should we work harder than men? What are men doing? Why can't we own land and the other means of production? In the event of a divorce or separation why is it we who have to quit without anything? What are our rights? What does the law say? Why do we have to do all the household work? Why do we have to take care of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 62.

everybody else? When these whys increase and multiply and become a genuine song, then things will change.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, Besha recognizes that the expected change cannot happen without the mobilization of women to take a stand against these patriarchal values that restrict women's potentials and possibilities. Women need not only to seek ways to fight these restricting values and norms. They also need to find ways to cope with their realities in such a way that they are able to design strategies that may make their lives more tolerable. In effect, Besha observes that a significant number of women have reached a point where they are no longer ready to accept oppressive relationships and oppressive family structures. Women have come to realize that there are many options they can take. She indicates that

a number of women are redefining their relationships, especially at the point of choosing between a beneficial scheme and an encumbering marital relationship. There is evidence that many more women than before are moving out of such relationships and setting up life on their own with their children, especially in urban areas. In cities such as Dar es Salam social welfare departments are having to deal with many such cases, proving that women are no longer ready to accept oppressive relationships. There is also an increased tendency for women to choose a single life.<sup>33</sup>

It can, therefore, be said that, while Besha concludes her research with the idea that African women's position in society is still one of endless struggle and oppression, she also recognizes significant achievements by women in terms of their responses to traditional norms that restrict and inhibit their participation and growth. Things are not as they used to be, even though the struggle continues. Thus, she suggests that these changing social relationships will definitely have an effect on established cultural and even religious practices. For this to happen, efforts should be geared toward the empowerment of more women in order to change social relations and systems--including the family. The church can play this role. Pastoral care that is gender-sensitive will

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 61.

empower women and men to ask questions about how they participate in the perpetuation of the unequal distribution of work in the family. Pastors, pastoral caregivers, and counselors will need to recognize that unequal gender relations exist in Christian families. Given this fact, they will need then to acquire skills in order for them to be able to provide support and pastoral understanding to women who are burdened by gender injustice and/or women who have decided to leave these oppressive relationships and/or family structures. Pastors and pastoral counselors will also need to have professional preparation that equips them to work with men who dominate family relationships, and in cases of women who have decided to leave oppressive relationships, help the perpetrators respect women's decisions to pursue self-fulfillment outside of constricting relationships.

#### Discrimination in education and economics

African women theologians contend that one of the areas in which sexist practices are clearly manifested is the area of education. The family as a place of gender subordination functions to the disadvantage of women. African women theologians argue that there is, in many families, a preferential option for the education of boys, and that there exist many factors which inhibit girls from completing their education.<sup>34</sup> Despite some efforts being made by some governments to improve the education of girls, studies show that the gender gap is widening in terms of the educational achievements of boys and opportunities for girls. At the root of this widening gap are the cultural norms and practices which foster restrictive images of women and their roles in the family and society. Many African women theologians observe that the substantial inequalities between the sexes in African societies demonstrate that a fundamental injustice exists at the very foundation of African societies, namely, the family. Any change expected in the area of education must begin in the family. For example, these theorists of women's experience note that girls have a heavy workload which does not allow them to have

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<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of some obstacles to African women's educational opportunities, see Mpundu, 17-18, 24-25.

sufficient time to allocate to their studies and, especially, the preparation of classes. The result is that most dropouts in schools are girls. Again, this fact reinforces African women's challenge to the family to reorder and restructure its gender norms and values so as to promote the growth and development of both men and women. The family and society will then benefit from the gifts and experiences of all. But, the challenge remains.

Congolese sociologist Gertrude Mianda indicates, for example, that the 1967 constitution in Congo required no discrimination based on gender in the admission of students in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in colleges and universities. This was intended to encourage boys and girls not only to be literate but also to get an education. However, Mianda notes that even though the rate of girls' education has considerably increased since Congo's independence in 1960, it is still lower when compared to that of boys. Statistics show that the rate of boys' schooling (education) is higher than that of girls. In 1988, the rates of schooling (education) at elementary and secondary levels were, respectively, 63.6% and 13.1% for girls, against 88.3% and 27% for boys. At the college and university levels, women represented about 13% of the total number of students registered in institutions of higher education.<sup>35</sup>

Mianda argues that this *sous-scolarisation* (or under-schooling) of girls in relation to boys can be explained by cultural and economic factors that limit women's opportunities. As far as cultural factors are concerned, she contends that Congolese culture ties the ultimate destiny of girls to marriage, which is considered a prestige and honor for the family.<sup>36</sup> Marriage grants to women the title of *mère de famille* (i.e.,

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<sup>35</sup> See Mianda, "Dans l'ombre de la 'démocratie' au Zaïre," 57 (translation mine).

<sup>36</sup> We need to note here that there is tension between Mianda's assertion about the Congolese cultural view of girls' ultimate destiny being tied to marriage and the findings of M. Lututula et al. on the opinions of parents in Kinshasa with regard to education and marriage. M. Lututula et al. found that, while parents valued marriage as a viable option for their children (male and female), they did not want this to interfere with their children's educational goals. In other words, parents in Kinshasa expected their children to finish school before considering marriage. This is also the case in other major

mother of the family) which is more honorable than that of *femme célibataire* (i.e., single woman). Mianda goes on to say that "in such a context, the education of girls is most often sacrificed by the family especially in times of economic crisis. Yet, marital life makes women not only economically dependent on her husband, but it also alienates her [from her goals]."<sup>37</sup> Mianda makes a footnote to this statement, saying that woman can become economically independent (i.e., autonomous). But cultural expectations require her to be taken care of by her husband. When she seeks employment outside of her home, this is feasible only with her husband's permission.<sup>38</sup> This socialization of women in the Congolese society, Mianda contends, must be reexamined and challenged so that women's lives will be defined in images and visions that include, but are not limited to,

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Congolese cities. This shows that the parents' understanding of the "destiny" of their daughters is not "ultimately marriage," even though this is valued. Career opportunities have priority. Even if this study focused on urban families and may not be predictive of such values in rural areas, at least it shows that there is a difference of values between urban and rural areas in gender expectations and practices. See M. Lututla et al., *Dynamique des Structures Familiales et Accès des Femmes à l'Éducation: Cas de la Ville de Kinshasa* (Dynamics of family structures and women's access to education: The case of the city of Kinshasa) (Kinshasa, Congo: Université de Kinshasa, 1996), 105.

<sup>37</sup> See Mianda, "Dans l'ombre de la 'démocratie' au Zaïre," 57 (translation mine).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. There is an inconsistency in Mianda's discussion of married women's lack of freedom in seeking employment outside of the home, and her discussion about how they cannot work outside without the permission of their husbands. Elsewhere Mianda has noted how Congolese market women show how much African women "insure the survival of their families" by being primary breadwinners, especially in times of economic crisis. She points out how women "have independently undertaken their commercial activities." I see some inconsistency in what Mianda says about women's lives in relation to outside employment or economic activities in these two sources. On the one hand, she says that cultural expectations are such that a woman cannot get outside employment without her husband's permission; on the other hand, she shows how Congolese women undertake independently their activities (including employment) outside of their homes. See her article "Women and Garden Produce of Kinshasa: The Difficult Quest for Autonomy," in *Women, Work, and Gender Relations in Developing Countries: A Global Perspective*, ed. Parvin Ghorayshi and Claire Bélanger (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 91-101



marriage and motherhood as sole possibilities for African women. Indeed, it is the *sous-scolarisation* of women, among other factors, which presents a block to women's growth and access to resources and opportunities for involvement in church and society.

Oduyoye, for example, writing from a West African context observes that "the numerical insignificance of African women in most professions reflects the global situation of women's lack of equal access to education."<sup>39</sup> This situation leads to a lack of political power and complete alienation from local government structures and church leadership. The difference in access to education and prestigious employment "cannot be divorced from the ideologies of male preeminence."<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, women's access to education and employment are closely tied. Mianda's analysis of some major employers in Congo indicates that women remain a minority, especially in executive positions. She indicates that the department of public service in Kinshasa, in 1982, had 51 women employees on a total of 1,333 (that is 3.82% of all personnel). The Congolese department of elementary and secondary education, in 1985, comprised 21% of female employees, and the rest were males. The *Banque du Peuple*, with its 1,934 employees, in 1986, had only 328 women (that is 17% of the total number of employees). The government owned mining company *Gecamines*, with its 33,000 employees had only 1913 women employees (that is 5.7% of the total number of employees).<sup>41</sup> Gender factors are clearly at work, not only in the educational process, but also in the employment of women and men. The numbers presented above must have changed by now, given the increase of women in educational institutions and the labor force in the last fifteen years or so, but I suspect that the cultural and economic factors

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<sup>39</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 93.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> Mianda, "Dans l'ombre de la 'démocratie' au Zaïre," 59-60.

discussed above are still operative. However, the study by Professor Lututula et al. mentioned earlier found that, contrary to the researchers' expectations, the practices of "educational motivations" (that is parents' practices and values around the education of children) proved not to be discriminatory of girls in favor of boys. They state:

In general, we have not observed discriminatory practices in the disfavor of girls, nor did we find in parents the generally held stereotypes and prejudices with regard to the schooling/education of girls. The level of education wished for children, the support given to them and to their studies, the kinds of schools attended, and the provision of tutoring [when necessary]. . . are all the same for girls and boys. Marriage, which we had considered as being mostly expected for girls by parents, was still valued as long as it did not disturb or hamper their education.<sup>42</sup>

Rather, the authors found that it is the *dynamiques des structures familiales* which seems to be a powerful determinant of the *sous-scolarisation* of girls, rather than discriminatory practices against girls.<sup>43</sup> Coupled with these realities are the socio-economic factors.

Lututula et al. indicate that the current economic crisis in Congo contributes to the increasing economic role of girls in the household, particularly those of school age.

"Many children, and especially girls, do not exclusively devote themselves to school alone. They also practice the *petit commerce* in front of their house or at the market place."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Lututula et al. suggest that economic crisis is a big factor that contributes to the *sous-scolarisation* of girls. They go on to contend that as long as the crisis persists, parents will become more and more unable to support the schooling of

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<sup>42</sup> Lututula et al., *Dynamique des Structures*, 105 (translation mine).

<sup>43</sup> The *dynamiques des structures familiales* include the size of the household, living arrangements and conditions, and the family status of children (that is, whether a child or children live with both parents, one parent, or with neither parents).

<sup>44</sup> Lututula et al., 108 (translation mine).

their children. This may also lead some parents to make difficult choices that will sacrifice the schooling of some children, especially girls "whose education/schooling is in competition with other activities which are deemed more productive both in the short-term and long run" in the present situation of economic crisis.<sup>45</sup> Again, the authors do not see cultural prejudices and stereotypes in some parents' choices to involve girls in the *petit commerce*, and keep boys in school, when faced with the economic crisis. They indicate that the parents' choice rests on the recognition of girls' capacity for the *petit commerce*, and boys' lack of it. I, on my part, think that perhaps African women theologians have identified the true reasons: the existence of unequal gender relations in the family.

#### Violence against women and the issue of women's silence

Violence against women and children is one of the recurring themes in African women's theological analysis of gender dynamics in the African family. The women theologians assert that violence against women is pervasive in the African context, just as it is around the world. Violence occurs at many levels and many spheres, including the domestic, social, political, economic, and religious spheres. This means, then, that violence happens in families, churches, schools, and other cultural arenas. African women theologians note that cultural, social, and religious ideologies all support and perpetuate men's violence against women (and children). Daisy Nwachuku's research among the Anangs, Ibibios, Igbos and Ngembas of Nigeria and Cameroon reveals that

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<sup>45</sup> Lututula et al., 109 (translation mine).

violence against women is rooted in the culture.<sup>46</sup> Many of the practices and demands made on women (and children) are based on an "inbuilt gender ideology with a bias against women,"<sup>47</sup> Nwachuku observes. Nwachuku found that a number of traditional values were found to increase violent activities against women (and children). I will discuss two that I find to be significant on this topic of violence. One of these is the blood myth. Nwachuku discovered that women's periodic shedding of blood is viewed as an act of impurity. That is why there is an "embargo" placed on women not to appear near deities, shrines, or special ceremonies in traditional African religions. When there is a cultural celebration and performances with religious meaning, women and female children are "not allowed to pass by the way in case the spirit being celebrated become defiled by female eye and contact."<sup>48</sup> This blood myth does violence to young girls and women's self-worth because girls and women who have internalized this teaching lose their sense of worth and dignity in relation to young boys and men, who have no restrictions based on physiological factors.

Another violent practice that is common, according to Nwachuku, is wife (and child) battering. Male opinion among the ethnic groups studied indicated that "it is the place of the man to discipline his wife and children by any method acceptable to him, as

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<sup>46</sup> Nwachuku, "Cultural and Psycho-Social Roots of Violence Against Women and Children," 221.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 225.

the head of the family."<sup>49</sup> The violence especially intensifies when a man is married to a woman whom he considers to be an unsubmitive wife and/or has a rebellious child. The criteria by which a man judges whether his wife and/or child is/are unsubmitive are found in the cultural norms that are transmitted from generation to generation. Hence, Nwachuku concludes that violence against women is rooted in sociocultural and religious values and practices that grant a dominant position and power to men and emphasize the subordination of women in marriage and family life. As we have already discussed above, these gender-based practices are deeply rooted in the families--including Christian families.<sup>50</sup>

Musimbi Kanyoro writes about the role of the family in the transmission of gender-biased values and practices that perpetuate the violence committed against women. While she recognizes the role of the African family as the center of communal life and its functions as a support system, Kanyoro's analysis, like her African feminist counterparts, reveals deeply rooted patterns of injustices and violence practiced against women in African cultures and the affirmation that the family is the primary crucible of such practices. Some of these practices are even condoned by an uncritical reading of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>50</sup> Bernadette Mbuy-Beya and Justine Kahungu Mbwati have also written about violent practices against women (and children) in the Congolese society, indicating that these are of a physical and psychological nature. See Bernadette Mbuy-Beya and Kahungu Mbwati, *La Femme, la Société, l'Eglise* (Women, society, and the church), a special issue of *Mbegu: Revue de la Pastorale des Jeunes* (Mbegu: Review of Pastoral Work with the Youth) 37 (1992): 1-35.

Like her African women colleagues in theology, she challenges the idealization of the African family as a just institution--a beacon of justice. One area in which injustice is observed deals with some of the cultural norms that regulate marital relationships. Cultural prescriptions on marriage render women vulnerable upon anticipating or entering marriage, qualified as a male-dominated institution. That is why it is important to approach Kanyoro's analysis of the African family in relation to her appraisal of African cultures. Kanyoro, like Riphenburg, Mpundu, and others, observes that African culture generally operates in the advantage of men who are socialized to dominate family relations and structures. While Kanyoro states that "no one would dream of condemning [African] culture wholesale,"<sup>51</sup> she nevertheless suggests that we look critically at African culture to point out certain beliefs, norms, and practices that perpetuate the violence committed against women. She maintains that critical examination of African cultures reveals that there are cases where they oppress and dehumanize women. She approaches theology through the lenses of culture and holds that culture is a significant element whose influence in family, church, and society cannot be overlooked in Africa. As such, culture has a theological and hermeneutical significance in the critical and constructive work African women theologians engage in. Kanyoro elaborates:

Culture is to African women's liberation theology what race relations are to African American womanist theologians. In both the private and public spheres, the roles and images of African women are socially and culturally defined. Within this framework of operation, women have been socialized into a state of numbness where we have lived our lives without really determining the course of it. For us women of Africa, the study of theology--any theology at all--opens doors long closed to us. A better understanding of the scriptures can affect the way women participate in group worship as well as private personal meditation. When we look critically at our cultures we know for certain that there are cases

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<sup>51</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge of Feminist Theologies," 180.

where they dehumanize women. If we relate our study of culture to the scriptures and theology, we are empowered with new courage and language to speak to new life-styles which reflect the justice of God for all people. We also contribute significantly to the theological debate by demanding serious attention to the field of cultural hermeneutics.<sup>52</sup>

Here Kanyoro highlights the influence culture has in defining women's roles in both the private and public spheres. What stands out here is what Kanyoro has pointed out in so many of her writings, namely, that African women have been silenced by culture,<sup>53</sup> in that the latter has relegated them to a secondary position in relation to men in family and society. This silencing is a form of violence. Many cultural values and practices exclude women from power and decision-making processes. Thus, for Kanyoro, the Christian tradition, including the way the scriptures have been used, has reinforced the oppression and marginalization of women from power-sharing activities. Kanyoro, like her African colleagues, observes that the cultural silencing of African women has made women unable to experience the liberating promise of God.

Thus, African women's theology calls for serious attention to the field of cultural hermeneutics. Such a critical way of approaching Christian tradition and the scriptures is believed to have the promise of enabling women to appropriate critically liberative aspects of the faith tradition and discard those diminishing ones in light of women's perspectives on culture and the faith traditions. Of paramount importance for Kanyoro is the examination of our understanding of God and how that understanding critiques and informs our relationship together--especially gender relations. This is crucial as "God

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 177-78.

<sup>53</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Silenced by Culture, Sustained by Faith"; "When Women Rise the Earth Trembles"; and "When the Wretched of the Earth Speak," in *Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak*, ed. Margaret Larom (New York: Friendship Press, 1994).

call us, women and men alike, into right relationships with each other, with all creation."<sup>54</sup> For Kanyoro, African women theologians root their theological reflections in "God's gracious gifts of creation and baptism. Men and women are each made in the image of God. We are each baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are named and claimed as the offspring of God."<sup>55</sup>

This understanding of who God is, and who men and women are in relation to God, calls into question those norms and practices that create a chasm between women and men. It calls into question the rigid gender roles defined by discriminatory cultural practices. That is why Kanyoro, like her African feminist colleagues, chooses culture as a starting point for theological analysis of women's situations in African families and churches. Such an approach intends to enable women to name oppressive aspects of African culture(s) to the end that efforts will be made to dismantle these oppressive cultural elements from the family's and church's relational practices. But Kanyoro is cognizant of the fact that African culture is not seen by women as inherently oppressive to them. In fact, African women do use African culture to define their identity. One can also note the use of the term "African" to qualify African women's theological activities. Clearly, this is indicative of their affirmation of their cultural identity as African. Further, what is distinctive in their use of African culture is their critical consideration of which elements need to be embraced and which need to be discarded, in terms of women's experience and well-being in family and church. Kanyoro explains:

Culture is a two-edged sword. In some instances it is the badge or even the "creed" of community identity. In others it is used to make a distinction between different people in the community which sometimes results in oppression and injustice. If today African women are able to name the oppressive aspects of our cultures, it has not come easily. For centuries we have gone along with cultural prescriptions to such an extent that we came to believe that our lives were to be

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<sup>54</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge of Feminist Theologies," 176.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



managed by the commands of our cultures. The fear of breaking taboos *silenced us* into a state in which we acted without questioning what we did.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Kanyoro notes the active role women have taken in opposing cultural prescriptions they find to be prohibitive of their growth and involvement. They want to break cultural taboos that have silenced them for centuries, and in so doing, address the violence that has accompanied their silencing. Many women have taken a proactive stance to speak out about gender issues, and how these have restricted them in many areas of life—including family, public, and professional life.

In my research I have been impressed with the existence of many women's interest groups, some with religiously- or faith-based goals, and others with political objectives. For example, *Gender Focus* is a secular organization concerned with the promotion of women in public/political life in Zambia. While it seeks to see the number of women serving in public offices increase, its members also do research and seek to promote women's values in order to contribute to successful conflict resolution in Zambia, and in Africa as a whole. Women, in *Gender Focus*, contend that African men have failed to promote lasting peace and harmony in Africa because their values are concerned with self-promotion, domination, and the confiscation of power to serve their own selfish ambitions.<sup>57</sup> Women's participation, they posit, would bring about a change in the values that order public and political life. In Malawi, the *Association of Progressive Women* (APW) is strongly involved in the promotion of women's rights and, especially, for an increased participation in politics and decision-making. In the 1999

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 178 (emphasis mine).

<sup>57</sup> See my reading notes taken from *The Zambian Daily Mail*, 24 June 1999, 7; *Gender Focus'* mailing address is P.O. Box 31421, Lusaka, Zambia.

elections, sixteen women, the highest number ever, won seats in Malawi's 193- member Parliament. This was seen by Malawian women as significant progress because there were only nine women in the last Parliament elected in 1994, which had 177 parliamentary seats. The South African *Daily Mail and Guardian* newspaper indicates that a recent national study in Malawi puts women's participation in all decision-making positions and processes at barely five percent, although they make up 52 percent of Malawi's population of 10 million people. However, women's groups such as the APW consider this to be a decisive step toward the achievement of their goal for fuller participation in decision-making processes in their country. Thus, they maintain that "equal participation in politics and decision-making is not only a demand for justice, but is also a necessary condition for women's interests to be seriously taken into account."<sup>58</sup>

In the former Zaire (D.R. Congo), the *Mouvement des Femmes pour la Justice et la Paix* has been very active and vocal in bringing Congolese women's issues to the attention of the larger public.<sup>59</sup> Among their priorities, they want to see women becoming more and more involved in peace-making efforts. Underlying their efforts is an understanding that women's values of relationship and respect for life, when fully embraced, can inspire alternative solutions to Africa's bloody conflicts epitomized in the Hutu-Tutsi conflicts which have spilled, so to speak, into other countries in Central Africa. The *Femmes Chrétiennes pour la Démocratie et le Développement* in the former Zaire, and the *Conseil National des Femmes*, continue to make every effort to promote

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<sup>58</sup> *Daily Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 28 June 1999, 15.

<sup>59</sup> The mailing address is B.P. 724 Limete, Kinshasa, République Démocratique du Congo.

women's representation in private and public companies, as well as in institutions of higher learning.<sup>60</sup> Their goal, as stated in the August 11, 1999 issue of the *Agence Congolaise de Presse*, is to see more women hold executive positions in public administration, public and private companies, as well as in certain socio-professional activities, mounting to at least 30% in the next five years or so.

All these efforts are aimed at challenging and, indeed, dismantling discriminatory cultural practices that perpetuate violence against women. Thus they address women's status in all spheres of functioning, including the family. Musimbi Kanyoro, for example, observes that the family, in African settings, is not only a nucleus of society; it is also the powerhouse where culture is preserved. Thus, she contends that "[the] family in Africa, while being the center of the support system, also has all the potential of being a nesting place for gender subordination of women. The family is not only the nucleus of society but more importantly the powerhouse where culture is preserved and promoted."<sup>61</sup> This means that some of the dehumanizing cultural practices that African women's theology denounces are practiced and promoted through the family, which is the main transmitter of oppressive elements in culture and yet, paradoxically, also a center for support and caring for communal life. That is why Kanyoro calls for the development of a critical approach toward culture--a consideration and evaluation of what practices to uphold and promote, and which ones to discourage and discard. She is of the opinion that an uncritical glorification of what passes for "cultural values" would impede women's

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<sup>60</sup> *Agence Congolaise de Presse* (The Congolese News Agency) (Kinshasa), 11 Aût 1999, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 178.

efforts to change practices harmful not only to women's well-being, but also to all members of the family and the human community as a whole. Thus, she insists that those aspects of African culture considered to be inimical to women's well-being must be changed and/or eradicated.

Nyambura Njoroge strongly affirms Musimbi Kanyoro's statement on the potential for destructive practices toward women being conveyed through the family. In fact, Njoroge states up front that sexism is, in fact, a practice that permeates all aspects of life in Africa, and the family is no exception. She observes that women are marginalized from the structures of power in church, family, and society. This marginalization and exclusion leads to women's subordination and, ultimately, to violence. Njoroge boldly asserts that violence against women begins in the family, which is also the primary agent of socialization. She approaches the issue of violence against women in the context of patriarchy and its effects on the family, church, and society. The following statement is worth quoting at length:

**Patriarchy is a destructive powerhouse, with systematic and normative inequalities as its hallmarks. It also affects the rest of the created order. Its roots are well entrenched in society as well as the church--which means we need well-equipped and committed women and men to bring patriarchy to its knees. The task of dismantling patriarchy [brings us] face to face with . . . [the] evil in our societies as well as religious institutions: violence against women. This begins in the family. Among all the other injustices experienced by women, violence in the home is the most difficult to talk about because it means exposing those most close to us (and who can come to our rescue if nobody else cares to do so). Whether it takes the form of sexual abuse, child abuse, incest, wife-beating, or economic deprivation, violence in the home is in most cases accompanied by silence. From a very early age, girls are taught not to discuss family affairs. These lessons continue as one approaches marriage. In my Gikuyu tribe in Kenya, young women are taught that the underlying meaning of the word *mutumia*, which means "a woman", is "the one who keeps silent." Upon marriage, the young bride is coached by the older women how to not 'tell it out'. Such lessons have caused many women untold horrors of violence in the home,**

which are occasionally reported in the national newspapers but almost never mentioned in the church.<sup>62</sup>

The theme of silence is a pervasive one in African women's writings. Here Njoroge points out how culture perpetuates the suffering of African women through the process of socialization which underscores the value of silence in relation to the maintenance of family harmony. It can be noted, in the above passage, that women are "traditioned" to endure difficult situations by sacrificing their well-being for the benefit of others. Njoroge notes that the socialization of women through myths, proverbs, folktales, symbols, etc. does not only do violence to women's well-being, it also continues to promote systematic and normative inequalities between men and women. Thus, to correct these negative effects of prohibitive cultural values, Njoroge envisions change in the ways men and women are socialized to relate to one another. She states:

[We must unlearn] internalized sexist practices, attitudes, beliefs and patterns. We must set out to create new models of how women and men relate in a non-sexist society. This is a life-time project which can only succeed when women and men agree to work together. As such, we have no illusion that speaking out, creating new models, and writing books and articles will deliver gender justice and reconciliation. Instead, we need to establish an ongoing dialogue with men with regard to dismantling sexism and seeing this project as part of the work of Jesus in establishing the reign of God.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 77-83.

<sup>63</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 82. Congolese male philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe has also discussed the traditional socialization of girls among the Luba of Katanga in Congo, pointing out how the advising of the bride by the mother, or any designated older maternal aunt, focused on her pleasing her husband. Mudimbe observes, "nobody invites her [i.e., the bride] to become a subject of a possible history in the making. On the contrary, she has to promote the respectability of her original family by practicing an ordinary life which fits into a discourse of obedience. A master charter is given to her as bride; it specifies and individualizes her major duties toward her spouse and his family and in so doing maintains the configuration of a patrilineal tradition." See V.Y. Mudimbe, "Living, or the Body of the Woman," in *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 139.

We find here a vision and search for gender justice and reconciliation--the creation of new men and women who seek to embody the principles of Christian living in their relationships with one another. This demonstrates for me African women's faith in the possibility of change--an indication that African women theologians believe in the "changeability" of men and women in their capacity to realign themselves with what is right and with life-enhancing causes.

African women's discussion of the rootedness of violence against women in culture and religion, and its location in the family (among other places), poses a significant challenge to the family and to pastoral care and counseling. The family, while affirmed as a center of the support system, is viewed as participating in cultural practices that generate violent acts toward women and promote gender subordination of women. This challenge is an invitation to the family to change its norms and relationship patterns, so they will be favorable to the growth and development of all family members--women, men, and children. Girls and boys are to be taught to value themselves and respect each other as being of sacred worth.

The challenge to pastoral care and counseling points to the need to reexamine its practices. Do they really respond adequately to the issues of violence and domination in the family? If not, what are the strategies to be developed to enable pastors and other pastoral caregivers to provide adequate pastoral responses that not only may facilitate healing for women who are bruised by violence, but also transform men who are perpetrators of violent acts against women? There is the need to train and equip pastoral caregivers to treat individual women who are affected by violence and men who perpetrate violent acts against women. Moreover, pastoral caregivers must develop skills in order to empower both women and men to be able to negotiate new gender arrangements that promote the well-being of all. Further, there is the need to provide educational opportunities in the church on the cultural and religious rationalizations of abuse and violence against women so as to create an awareness of the issues and serve as

a way to enlist women and men in the work of rearranging relationships patterns and norms that regulate these.

### **Neglect of women's individuality**

In her important book *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye echoes many of the issues discussed so far. She insists that there are many reasons why African men and the church should respond to the challenges of feminism. Among these reasons, she cites the following: the unjust systemic sexism of patriarchy (or male domination); the recognition of global patriarchy which threatens to "engulf" all human institutions in Africa; the subjugation of women to a secondary place in family and church life; the emphasis on communal identity to the extent that one is led to believe that outside of the group (marriage, family), one is viewed as a "non-entity"; the placement of value on how one has to sacrifice one's personal interests and ambitions for the benefits of the group or the community, and more.

According to Oduyoye, these factors lead her to argue that in African contexts "corporate personality" has priority over the personhood of the individual; and that this is especially emphasized when that individual is a woman. She describes African women in terms of marriage, family, culture, religion, and the pervasive influence of patriarchy. She examines how these institutions affect women's roles and participation in Africa through involvement in politics, the economy, social structures and arrangements, and in the manifestations of religion.

Oduyoye contends that the affirmation of individuality is not central to African thought and practical living. This means that individuality is not the highest value in African ways of being and living. She insists that one of the problems facing African women is this issue of individuality. She argues that it is difficult to become an individual within a context that puts much value on communal identity. Cultural norms that regulate relationships and human interactions discourage persons, and especially women, to individualize and differentiate--especially when that means to seek self-

fulfillment, and achieve success for one's own sake. Oduyoye goes on to say that in Africa to be a person is to be part of the community. In her judgment this is a good thing, in that this view or value has the well-being of the persons who make up the community at heart. However, Oduyoye contends that the fact that high value has been placed on communal identity--leading to the affirmation of corporate personality--becomes problematic and potentially oppressive when some of the values and norms regulating relationships contain elements oppressive and diminishing for persons. She insists that the emphasis put on corporate personality stifles individual initiatives and discourages the pursuit of personal ambitions. For her, such an attitude toward the individual and the community defeats the very purpose that it seeks to serve and emulate, namely, the well-being of all persons within the community.<sup>64</sup> I will propose, in Chapter 5, a perichoretic view of person and community that will affirm adequately both individuality and community without reducing one or the other into a secondary position, or dissolving one into the other.

At any rate, Oduyoye maintains that the discouragement of women to individualize is especially heightened when a woman is vocal about engaging in personal improvement and personal goals. She contends that women who have taken this course or route have been characterized as witches, that is, "women who work against the unity and coherence of community."<sup>65</sup> This means that every woman who pursues personal goals and interests is viewed as going against the well-being of the community--of the family. The characterization of a woman as a witch is especially heightened when the woman has achieved a high level of success. Oduyoye contends that the fact that a woman is not dependent upon a man seems to threaten the structures of patriarchy and, as

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<sup>64</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



a consequence, leads to the ostracization of those women who are viewed as being independent--hence, viewed as leading lives inimical to communal well-being. She states:

There seems to be endemic societal aversion to women who are successful or women who are not dependent on men. Women must not call attention to themselves or be outstanding in any way... the least misstep or mistake in the traditional role of wife and mother can undo completely and identify her as a witch.<sup>66</sup>

We see in this excerpt a special emphasis on marriage (being a wife) and motherhood (the cultural mandate to continue the lineage and keep the husband's family going and growing). If a woman does not accomplish the role ascribed to her by the culture, she is automatically perceived as being selfish, and hence, a witch. African feminist theologians argue that there is a problem with such kinds of beliefs or norms. The latter are viewed as not giving women the choice to be what they want to be. As a consequence, they engage in the business of fulfilling cultural expectations that may end up proving to be oppressive, especially when the woman does not find fulfillment in the carrying out of the roles assigned to her by culture and tradition. Oduyoye, therefore, decries a view that values women as simply objects of genetic and social transmission, and she asserts that marriage practiced in this manner becomes diminishing to women, and it does not promote their human flourishing as individual persons. She comments: "In the West African context marriage is fraught with pitfalls for the well-being of women and their dignity and worthiness as autonomous beings."<sup>67</sup> She goes on to assert that the dependence and domination mentalities of women and men sharing marriage need transformation. In this call for change, Oduyoye affirms that real change will come about when women can say (with or without husbands and children) that the most

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 122-23.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 138.

important fact is that women are human and will find fulfillment in reaching for goals that they set for themselves.

Oduyoye is interested in women's dreams. She calls this process of dreaming the "bringing into being new arrangements of reality." She states, "[we] dream of what we want to be and we identify who is going to create the environment in which we may be ourselves. We dream about the future relationships of men and women in Africa.... Homes becom[ing] living structures with movable walls, not places where we women are placed but a space in which to be human."<sup>68</sup> Here she emphasizes issues of relational sensitivity and fulfillment, as well as the re-creation of homes, indeed, families, as places where women (and men) will have their dignity recognized, through the affirmation of their individuality.

Oduyoye, and other African feminist theologians, raise very important questions in relation to women's quest for identity, the pursuit of personal goals, and how the consideration of these issues may impact both men's and women's perspectives and the relational patterns they build. Their work seeks to uncover what they see as "hidden" patriarchal assumptions in the values and norms that govern both men's and women's lives. Thus, their work does not only challenge men and the institutions that serve their interests. African feminist theologians also challenge African women, and in fact, decry the fact that many women have also internalized values that are diminishing of their dignity and discouraging of their personal improvement and empowerment. On this issue, Oduyoye, for example, challenges African women for displaying what she calls a "compulsory attachment" to men and marriage. She calls women to seek liberation by demonstrating a genuine desire for freedom whether or not one is "attached" to men. In other words, Oduyoye is arguing against an assumption that a woman can be fulfilled only by being attached to a man. She contends that when a woman is really free to be

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 15.

herself, she can join and/or initiate a relationship with men that is not diminishing and oppressive. In this sense she asserts that liberation for women in African settings must happen in the family and the church. She advocates women's freedom from cultural assumptions that promote the idea that singleness, for example, indicates a sense of incompleteness; or that individuality is inimical to the building of community. She does this by way of affirming women's identity, a sense of self, and an affirmation of women's desire for personal fulfillment. It is in the context of this discussion that she asks poignant questions such as this one: "Is family [life] a vocation, a demand of biology, or a convenient base for organizing human society?" Underlying such questions is an assumption that patriarchal systems forbid questions of this genre, as these present a threat to the structures that feed on and promote male domination. Like her counterparts, Oduyoye notes that the resistance to change cultural images of women is still strong and difficult to overcome. She elaborates:

In Africa, the very idea of a "free woman" conjures up negative images. We have been brought up to believe that a woman should always have a suzerain, that she should be "owned" by a man, be he father, uncle, or husband. A "free woman" spells disaster. An adult woman, if unmarried, is immediately reckoned to be available for the pleasure of all males and is treated as such. The single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to "possess" her. Some women are struggling to be free from this compulsory attachment to the male. Women want the right to be fully human, whether or not they choose to be attached to men.<sup>69</sup>

However, despite these negative feelings surrounding the issue of women's liberation, she wants to see women embrace the liberation movement spreading all over Africa, so that African women will want to decide for themselves what constitutes a liberating and liberative life.

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<sup>69</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 4.

Oduyoye dreams of new women who will engage in the process of changing established oppressive norms and relational patterns. She dreams of women's individuality being affirmed and promoted. To demonstrate how culture suppresses women's individuality, as well as how women have internalized these oppressive aspects of the culture she is discussing, Oduyoye cites a popular song girls used to sing in their play when she was growing up. As they played, they chose to stay in "fetters" simply because of the cultural stipulations and expectations. The song reads as follows:

Fatima, doesn't that hurt?  
 Sure! I am miserable.  
 Then, pull it out!  
 No, I may not do that.  
 It is the practice of my father's town.  
 It is the practice of my mother's town.<sup>70</sup>

Clearly, one can see in this song an internalization of some values and practices which are oppressive to these girls who are playing; yet, the tradition requires that they not challenge these practices as they are part of the community's ethos. This is the kind of thing from which Oduyoye and other African women theologians call women to liberate themselves. She sees in these "fetters of culture" a hindrance to the fulfilling of women's full potentials, including the development of individuality. The fetters diminish and stifle women's growth toward self-fulfillment. She comments:

We seek to discard these fetters of culture; we seek full humanity and some principles to guide our lives in community... just relations can be developed only when the equal value of males and females is upheld and allowed to flourish.<sup>71</sup>

In this excerpt, Oduyoye is concerned with human flourishing for African women. To accomplish this, she calls for "just relations"--relationships in which all participants are given an equal value and fair share; relationships in which all participants have the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 81.

power to alter aspects of the relationships that are not contributive to liberative practices. Indeed, Oduyoye engages in an exploration of some values and principles that can contribute to the construction of a community that is facilitative of the emergence of individuality and liberative relationships.

One also sees in the above-cited song the issue of silence that so many African feminist theologians address in their writings. While participants in the song acknowledge the pain and suffering involved in this "ritual," they willingly accept their condition in order to honor and respect the tradition of both mother's and father's towns. It is very interesting to note that the song being discussed here points to the reality that there is an "empowering voice" within the tradition, calling for liberation--"Fatima, doesn't that hurt?" represents this voice. One also may notice that this "liberative and empowering voice" is also very insistent in that it really compels Fatima (who represents girls and women) to "pull it out," to free herself from the hurt involved in the "game." But it is interesting to observe that, while Fatima expresses her feelings ("Sure! I am miserable"), she chooses to continue being part of the game. Though the voice in the tradition calls her to stop "playing the game," Fatima choose to play the game, *and* she remains silent toward "the practice of father's and mother's towns." The issue of silence here is crucial. One may say that there is a sense in which, for Oduyoye and others, women and other marginalized persons are participating in their own oppression by not raising their voices to challenge that which is causing their misery. Thus, Oduyoye decries the silence of African women and calls for a critical examination of African traditions to find values that support the well-being and dignity of all participants in the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 82.

human community. In her book mentioned above, she makes an analysis of traditional folktales and proverbs to show how they support the oppression of African women, and she maintains that it is urgent to "ascertain what practices are genuinely traditional and to what extent they correspond to our sense of justice and fair play."<sup>72</sup> The goal is the overcoming of the unequal value assigned to people on the basis of gender--indeed, the practice of sexism within the family, church, and society. But Oduyoye, like Kanyoro and Njoroge, is very clear that sexism will not disappear of its own. It must be dismantled by both women and men who have been made aware of the oppression of women by culture, religion, and tradition. Like other African feminist theologians, she uses very strong language by describing the life of a black African woman as that of a "slave of slaves." This situation cannot change, she asserts, unless women take things in their own hands to bring about the kind of changes they want to see happen in the family, church, and society. Instead of accepting the oppressive elements of the culture and tradition unchallenged, African women need to view "sexism as a perspective that requires analysis, leading to action that will orient people and communities towards justice."<sup>73</sup>

Here, Oduyoye speaks against the sexism that is manifested even in institutions of higher education, for example, in the sexism perpetrated by the anonymity of the African woman found in the so-called "academic studies" of the African woman. She contends that the way the African woman is approached and studied as an "object" needs to stop. She needs to be seen as a subject; someone who participates in her own story and, in fact,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 89.

tells her own story to the world. She specifically critiques Euro-American women and a few African men for conducting studies that continue to foster a negative image of the African woman.<sup>74</sup> She decries the fact that they study African women "under such rubrics as marriage, family, or population, but hardly as a person." She goes on to state that "[only] when such research is thorough and empathetic does it become valuable as an expression of solidarity with the oppressed."<sup>75</sup>

In the same vein, Oduyoye states: "Before the Decade of Women, information about African women could be found under index headings such as marriage, family, or menstruation. Women as a social category were virtually absent... and any book about Africa was almost without exception, about men and their world... and *their women*. When appearing in an account, African women were portrayed as *docile doves*."<sup>76</sup>

Her call and challenge is nurtured by a vision of a world in the making, which she defines as a "world of relationships yet to be realized and maybe even yet to be created; a world full of potential for affirming the humanity of all." Her vision is sustained by her belief that "by looking more critically around us, as well as deeper into history, we can be motivated and empowered to create structures that obviate all that we have denounced in patriarchy."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Oduyoye makes this critique without specifically naming the studies she has in mind.

<sup>75</sup> Oduyoye, 82.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 83 (emphasis mine).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 8.

Her challenge to the way scholarship has contributed to the effacement and objectification of the African woman becomes in and of itself a call for African women to "individualize." In other words, it becomes a call for African women to claim their personhood and manage to tell their story and experience to the world as *subjects*, rather than being spoken about, or being spoken for. She calls African women to "right" their relationship with men and to get involved in the process of changing their situation by voicing their concerns and sharing their experiences with one another, as well as with the church and the larger society. For her, in the "righting" of the women's condition, she calls academia to account as she asks for reviews of priorities in what is being studied. She specifically calls for the integration of women's studies in the humanities, as well as the inclusion of gender factors into all studies—including theology and religion. Women need to be empowered to accomplish this task. However, Oduyoye recognizes that women cannot be empowered by the same religious or cultural consciousness that diminishes their dignity and humanity. The case in point here is religion and culture. The oppressive values and norms that are found in these institutions cannot be used to empower women to attain their goal of liberation, individualization, and freedom. Again, she points out that "[this] lack of empowerment has its roots in a prevailing ideology of sexism. Yet, political rhetoric would have us concentrate on the global issues of Western exploitation rather than have us begin to clear our throats to speak about 'home truths,' including the systematic attempts to push women off the land."<sup>78</sup>

This critique of African governments' rhetoric regarding the oppression of Africans by Western domination is very revealing of the devices used both in church and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 101.



society to avert people's attention from their immediate causes of suffering. They point people to external factors that indeed are contributive to people's pain. African male theologians have consistently written about European colonization, slavery, and imperialism, and how these led to the destruction of so many things that were the very foundations of the identity and spirituality of African people. They fail, however, to engage adequately internal factors that are at the root of the many sufferings undergone by people in African countries. The theological program of inculturation, for example, centers its whole attention on the valuation of African traditional cultures, focusing on Africa's glorious past. I do personally maintain that such an enterprise had its merit in the wake of movements of liberation and independence of the 1950s and 1960s. It is about time to enter into another era of examining factors that continue to generate suffering. African feminist theology does a great job of inviting Africans to look at themselves, be honest about the African reality,<sup>79</sup> and then be bold about addressing the root causes for much of the suffering we see on the continent.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The above examination of African women's experience in the family and society shows that women suffer because of the sociocultural values and practices that oppress them and relegate them to the margins. These "home truths," as Oduyoye calls them, must seriously be engaged by the church, if the church and, more specifically, the vocation of pastoral care and counseling, is to be faithful to its mission of healing. The consideration of recurrent themes in African women's analysis of gender relations reveals how women are pushed into positions of weakness and powerlessness by a "culture of

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violence” that is nurtured and sustained by certain belief systems, cultural values, and relational practices. Indeed, there is a need to effect changes in all areas of family and societal life. Pastoral caregivers can contribute to the process of change by exposing and condemning cultural violence against women; challenging systematic and normative inequalities between males and females in families; redressing the exclusion of women in decision-making processes in society; addressing the misuse of power in gender relations; and, promoting the quest for gender justice and reconciliation.

Above all, pastors and other pastoral caregivers can affirm both women's and men's efforts to individualize and differentiate by challenging--through preaching, teaching, and liturgy--cultural norms and prescriptions inimical to women's growth and self-concept. They need also to challenge gender-based male privileges by teaching boys and men to refuse to participate in the promotion and perpetuation of male privilege (over women and girls) at home and in society. More importantly, men and boys will need to be equipped to foster the habit of recognizing and naming unearned male privileges wherever they encounter them and, again, to refuse to participate in them. I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6 how pastoral care and counseling can facilitate these changes and propose in Chapter 7 what men can concretely do to increase gender justice. We now turn to Chapter 3 where I examine gender dynamics in church and theology.

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<sup>79</sup> See Martey, *African Theology*.

## CHAPTER 3

### African Women's Theology: Gender Dynamics in Church and Theology

#### Introduction

A primary concern of African women's theology is to voice their protest against sexism and its roots in religion and culture. This protest is initially two-pronged, since it is directed at both African religion and culture and Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 2, I examined African women theologians' discussion of how culture, tradition, religion, educational, and socioeconomic practices affect women's lives in the family and society. In this chapter, I focus on how these factors affect women's lives in the church. As in Chapter 2, I isolate and discuss some of the recurrent themes in the theology of African women that reveal problems in gender relations in the African church. As such, this selection of themes is not exhaustive.

It should be pointed out here that "the church" in this dissertation is understood in its ecumenical sense as the African women theologians being considered come from different sectors of Christianity, including Roman Catholicism, various Protestant churches, as well as African Independent Churches. Such an ecumenical outlook reflects African women theologians' approach to women's experience in the different Christian churches in Africa, as well as their openness to insights from non-Christian religions.<sup>2</sup> Their approach to theology is intentionally ecumenical, with an awareness of the importance of having an interfaith focus as well, because it aims at listening to and reaching as many women as possible with the message of liberation and empowerment.<sup>3</sup> Thus, religion in general, and the church in particular, are very good places to engage

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<sup>1</sup> Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation," 41.

<sup>2</sup> See the case of Muslim women's involvement in the Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology.

<sup>3</sup> See the work of Nyambura Njoroge, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya.

women's issues and situations, because women sustain a strong presence in religion, and especially in the church.

African women theologians have expressed a strong criticism of the church for its neglect of women's issues. While they have argued that violence against women begins in the family, they have also noted that it is carried into the church where women are excluded from the structures of power and relegated to the margins. Women are excluded from decision-making processes and subordinated to their male counterparts in the church as well as in the family. Thus, they conclude that women are not only marginalized, excluded, subordinated, and silenced by culture, as Musimbi Kanyoro eloquently posits in her writings cited above. They are also silenced by religion, and particularly by the church in its support and perpetuation of patriarchal values and structures that order and govern church life.

### **Recurring Themes**

#### **Women's Roles and Images in the African Church**

In her study on women's role in the African Church, Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (of the Democratic Republic of Congo) observes that African women are deeply involved in the life of the church. They participate in a variety of ministerial activities and contribute to the development and growth of the church in a variety of ways. Mbuy-Beya names the following activities as characterizing women's presence in the church: participation in the liturgy; singing in the choir; directing and guiding the youth; proclamation of the Word of God; teaching catechism; being present at the offertory, alongside men, and offering to God "the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands."<sup>4</sup> In addition to these things, women are involved in the leadership of charismatic renewal groups as

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<sup>4</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches in Africa," in *African Synod*, 179.

shepherdesses and as leaders of living ecclesial communities or small groups. There are also a number of women religious who serve in Catholic parishes as assistant pastors.<sup>5</sup>

However, despite these encouraging developments, Mbuy-Beya notes that while women are actively involved in the life of the church in many ways, their leadership has not been fully accepted by some male church leaders and the laity (there are some exceptions, as we will see later in this chapter). Mbuy-Beya recounts stories of Catholic women who have expressed their joy of participating in the life of the church and providing leadership, as well as the pain and suffering they experience as they feel unaccepted because of their gender. The following story, by mama Marie-Louise Kasongo Mujinga Kinyembo (Democratic Congo) is worth quoting at length.

The first call from God came to me when I was twelve, after my confirmation. In the silence of my soul I felt God's passing and I realized that I was a Christian and saw that my life was changing. . . . I heard the second call at the age of thirteen. Without knowing that another way will open up before me, I thought of consecrating myself in religious life. It wasn't hard for me to give up the idea of religious life and consecrate myself in married life at the age of thirteen. . . .

I was filled with the Holy Spirit in 1979 when the Lord chose me for his service. Guided by my bishop, I started the prayer group called Light of the World. Things went well and the members used their gifts to answer the appeals of God's people through prayer and healing. My husband encouraged me in this new ministry, and my children prayed with me, especially the older girls, who continue to be very active.

In 1984 my pastor asked me to coordinate the groups active in the parish and to belong to the parish council. This was not at all easy for my male brethren. Although the pastor had entrusted the organization of all groups to me, my brothers could not accept his decision and clearly showed their preference to be guided by a man and not a woman. I was deeply hurt. Even now it is impossible to find unanimity in these groups and to provide any kind of real organization. I'm not ready to resign and I trust in the Lord. . . .

In 1991 I was elected chairperson of charismatic renewal in the archdiocese. The first woman named to the post, I found it no small task! The Congress was a success, but the editing of the minutes was assigned to some male intellectuals who never did it, in spite of numerous reminders. Is this a way of protesting against my nomination? In any case, it shows that we have a long way

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<sup>5</sup> The role of an assistant pastor does not include presiding over the mass and blessing holy communion, and related responsibilities.

to go to be converted . . . . I keep struggling in prayer for wisdom. The bishop and his vicar general continue to encourage me, advising me to be patient. I'm not looking for glory, but as a mother I'd like to keep giving life in the Church through a ministry of prayer and reconciliation. The Lord has done great things for me. I have witnessed the most unexpected conversions. How I wish for my whole life to be praise! As long as the Lord needs me, I'm there and available.<sup>6</sup>

A few things can be observed in this excerpt. First, Kasongo makes a number of affirmations in her story. She indicates her feeling called by God to ministry and her sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is on this affirmation that she bases her involvement in the church, and her desire to provide leadership in the areas she feels equipped by the Holy Spirit to do so. Second, Kasongo confirms that married life is, for her, a valid arena in which to live out her vocation or consecrated life--she views her family as an arena for spiritual life and growth. Third, she points out the support she receives from her bishop and vicar in her commitments and responsibilities in the church. Fourth, Kasongo affirms her womanhood and motherhood as part of her calling in the church. As a mother, she wills to stay in the church to "give life" through "a ministry of prayer and reconciliation."

These are important affirmations that reveal how Kasongo, and other African women see their role and participation in the church as grounded in God and sometimes in their femaleness. It is God who calls them to be part of the life of the church and to participate in ministry. It is the Holy Spirit who equips them with specific talents and gifts for the benefit of the whole church. Indeed, the use of the category of motherhood to interpret women's role in the church is particularly challenging current practices surrounding ordination. If, indeed, some African women affirm their role of mother, and want to have opportunities to "keep giving life in the church," why is the church hesitant to affirm this important role and image that African culture itself supports? If African

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<sup>6</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches in Africa," 179-80. Here the term *religious life*, in French, refers to life consecrated to God through a (Catholic) religious order; *brothers* refers to fellow male parishioners.

women are viewed as mothers by the culture, and one of the commonly known facts about mothers is that they cook for their children and families, why can't African women, in certain denominations, preside over the Eucharist, and serve the most important meal of the Christian community? One, clearly, has to wonder why African women prepare meals for their families, but are not allowed to prepare and serve the most important meal for their family of faith. This exclusion of women from ordination and, hence, from presiding over this most important ritual of the church, is inconsistent with African cultural practices. To be consistent, the church must be willing and open to accept the theological category of motherhood to enrich our understanding of faith, and our practice of the Christian life and ministry. I am aware that this statement could be obsolete for some denominations that already ordain women in African settings. But, it nevertheless stands for all those denominations that have not yet opened doors for women to participate more fully in the life of the church and in ordained ministry.

Further, it is interesting that the bishop and vicar have also been instrumental in inviting Kasongo to take on certain leadership roles in the church community. However, one might note obviously that the positions in question are not sacramental, that is, they do not require ordination. But Kasongo's story points to the fact that one does not need to be ordained, or belong to a religious order (nun, priest, or otherwise), to be involved in ministry in the Catholic Church, as important as this is. This reminds me of Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers. The whole people of God, male and female, are called to participate in the ministry of the church in all its aspects.

Another interesting observation is the difference in perspective between the clergy and the lay people in relation to Kasongo's leadership in the diocese. Kasongo indicates clearly the resistance she received from the males who had a preference for a male leader—a clear indication of the existence of gender bias among her co-parishioners and other lay persons in the diocese. One finds in Kasongo's story the challenges of sexism and her pain and struggle in dealing with (or handling) gender-based rejection.

Kasongo's story is also a story of courage and a strong affirmation of her sense of being called by God to participate in God's service. Her determination to press on in her duties, despite sexist resistances, and her resolve to remain in the church and continue the struggle, are reflective of the spirit of African women's theology which seeks not only to listen to women's stories of struggles but also to point out their courage and determination to maintain women's presence in the leadership of the church, and by so doing continue to labor for the new kind of church they want to see come into existence. Indeed, Kasongo's story indicates how active women are in African churches, as well as how determined they are to contribute to the strengthening of its ministries through changing its structures and norms that inhibit their full participation. Both the bishop and vicar's encouragement, and Kasongo's resolve to maintain her leadership role, are signs of hope for the kind of change and future toward which the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians are laboring.

Nevertheless, despite the preponderance of stories such as Kasongo's, Mbuy-Beya laments that women's issues are not a recognized priority by the Church leadership and the Church as a whole. While the Church clearly denounces socio-political situations that oppress and demean people's lives, it does not explicitly include in its agenda the situation of women as described by Concerned African Women in Theology. Mbuy-Beya cites an example of Archbishop Kabanga of Lubumbashi, Zaire, in his address at the opening of the diocese synod in 1989, in which he stated that "Africa needs a Gospel and a faith to save us from the *sinful situations* that make up our daily life," and that "[we need to be] prophets of now and not cantors of a bourgeois gospel."<sup>7</sup> Mbuy-Beya goes on to observe that although the Archbishop called the church to fight against "sinful situations," the facts clearly indicated that the situation of women was not considered to be one of these sinful situations. The synod did not include women's issues in its agenda,

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<sup>7</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches in Africa," 181.



even though women were also invited to attend. Further, even though women raised the issues related to their place in the church, this was not reflected in the minutes of that synod as they made no allusion to women's challenges and protests. Mbuy-Beya observes, "I remember with great pleasure the evening when the lay people decided to walk out of the synod because the Church was making so little room for them. Women religious, with tears in their eyes, told the bishops that they too were fully members of the Church. In response, a moving Eucharist was celebrated to close the synod."<sup>8</sup>

As a result of women's protest at the synod, Archbishop Kabanga of Lubumbashi, five years later, published a pastoral letter on women entitled "I Am a Human and Not Your Doormat." (It is interesting to note here that the original of Kabanga's letter, written in French, used the term "man" to refer to "human" as reflected in the English translation from which I am quoting.) Kabanga called attention to the issues women raised regarding their status in the Church, and how the Church seems not to use women to their fullest possible potentials. Archbishop Kabanga denounced the fact that the Church did not use women beyond "giving birth in the sacrament of matrimony to become good mothers of families or by religious profession, to become 'good sisters.'"<sup>9</sup>

Kabanga, as quoted by Mbuy-Beya, goes on to call for a change in mentality in both men and women. He insists that "it is not sufficient to pray or lament; women must be committed from now on to helping our people to improve their lot. Thus he calls upon women to cease waiting and cease acting like defeated victims, but rather to take full charge of themselves."<sup>10</sup> In support of Archbishop Kabanga's pastoral letter, Mbuy-Beya adds a call to African women and to the church: "The liberation of women is in the hands of woman herself and she must fight for it. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church in

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 181-82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 185.

**Africa must cease being a masculinized Church and become a Church for both men and women."<sup>11</sup>**

**I have a sense that Mbuy-Beya is appreciative of some signs of hope she sees in leaders such as Archbishop Kabanga of Lubumbashi, Southern Congo. But, in spite of these hopeful signs, Mbuy-Beya insists that there still is a long way to go before women's issues can become an integral part of the Church's concerns and priorities. Although the Archbishop of Lubumbashi demonstrated an awareness of women's status in the church and society by denouncing the status quo, his invitation to all to review their conduct in light of this issue was not revolutionary enough. In fact, his invitation to women to "cease waiting and acting like victims" seems to be blaming the victims of unjust church practices. The document he wrote remains a pastoral letter with no visible implications in terms of changing specific tenets of the Church's governing principles. There is no articulation of men's roles and the church's role in the call to change.**

**Calling women to take "full charge of themselves" assumes that African women are not actively involved in the affirmation of who they are, or seeking full participation in the church. One may understand Mbuy-Beya's choice to use Kabanga's letter in her call for women to continue their struggle for liberation because Kabanga is one of the minority in the church leadership who acknowledge the church's marginalization and silencing of women. Nevertheless, what Kabanga is asking of women is already happening. African women, and more particularly Congolese women, are very actively involved in shaping their future in the church and society. Many women already know that women's liberation requires their full involvement and participation. Perhaps,**

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

**Kabanga's call must be specifically geared towards men in the church. His letter and challenge could be liberative for men in that he recognizes that there is a problem with how the church relegates women to the margin and neglects to address problems in gender relations. Kabanga's letter could be a basis on which to invite men to think about how they are contributing to gender problems by their attitudes of denial and trivialization of women's issues. Kabanga's challenge to the image of women held in the church can clearly be addressed to men by asking them to identify how their images of women and of themselves contribute to the cultural and religious confinements of women to being "good mothers of families," or by religious profession being "good sisters."**

**I dare to suggest that Kabanga's letter remains, in light of my above criticism, a pastoral letter with no visible impact on specific tenets of the church's governing principles and on the prevailing images of women (and men) in the church. To make a difference, the letter should have been addressed to men and not to women. Given what we know about the religio-cultural roots of women's subordination and silencing in the church, I do not think it is an appropriate pastoral strategy for a male pastor, or female pastor for that matter, to ask church women to become "committed to help our people to improve" women's conditions as Kabanga does. Many more women than men are already involved in this struggle. More men need to change images they hold of themselves and of women, for the change sought by African women theologians to be fully realized.**

**As Mbuy-Beya observes, women's issues are still marginal in the life of the Church. Gender dynamics are still in favor of men. This is especially observable in terms of the relationship between ordained male clergy persons and female religious in**

the Catholic Church. Mbuy-Beya contends that while consecrated African religious women, for example, seek greater involvement and participation in ministerial tasks in the Church, they are often not given the opportunity to use to their satisfaction their gifts and graces. In fact, Mbuy-Beya argues that while religious consecrated women play an important role in the Church, often they are "treated like the personal housekeepers of the bishop and of the local clergy."<sup>12</sup> This, she contends, is clearly a hindrance to women's efforts to claim their rightful place in all spheres of the life and ministry of the Church. Further, Mbuy-Beya is mindful of greater factors that hinder women's participation in the Church. She maintains that these difficulties are of a structural nature, and that it is difficult to try to make changes in this area. She states:

The priesthood of women is a difficult topic to address in the Catholic Church, still more so in Africa! Yet it would be good to study it in the light of certain African traditions that have given women an important place in the life of the community. The fact that so many women spontaneously emerge as "spiritual leaders" is a sign of the times that must be reckoned with. The current proliferation of different kinds of spirituality gives proof of the anguished search of our people, who are crushed by suffering and yet hungry for God. Many different forms of spirituality are a challenge to the structures of our institutional churches. Many people marginalized by church law feel more at ease in prayer groups outside the churches, and it is often women shepherdeses who take on these ministries of welcome and of God's mercy.<sup>13</sup>

Mbuy-Beya's observations on the priesthood of women (or the ordination of women) are critical and insightful. While she acknowledges the difficulty of addressing this issue in the Roman Catholic Church, she makes a proposal to approach this issue on the basis of the practices of African Traditional Religion in which women had an active and visible leadership role that included leading worship, religious rituals, and other religious ceremonies. She calls our attention to a common phenomenon in the Congolese society,

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<sup>12</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches," 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

and elsewhere in Africa, namely, the emergence of prayer groups. It is very interesting that the majority of people attending and leading these groups are women. I agree with Mbuy-Beya that "the fact that so many women spontaneously emerge as 'spiritual leaders' is a sign of the times that must be reckoned with." Could it be that the growth in number of women spiritual leaders in "free" prayer groups and/or African Independent Churches reflects the reality of exclusion and subordination that women experience in the missionary churches? As a Catholic nun, and Dean of the College of Religious Studies (not a seminary or school of theology), Mbuy-Beya calls the Catholic Church to reckon with Vatican II's declaration on the Church in light of women's challenges. She states, "Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (No. 32), says there is but one chosen people of God, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity. The Council's declaration is very clear: in Christ and in the Church there is no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex. 'For you are all one in Christ'."<sup>14</sup> To emphasize the link between women's struggle with other socio-political issues that the Church has addressed, and/or is addressing now, Mbuy-Beya poses the following question: "Are our churches aware that they must lead the fight against structures that oppress women in the same way that they led the fight against structures that oppress blacks in South Africa? This is one and the same struggle."<sup>15</sup> Mbuy-Beya's vision, like that of her women colleagues, is to develop new ways of doing things; new norms that order the church's thinking and practice. She advocates for a recognition and affirmation of what women are already doing in the church. She goes further to insist that women offer more services. In her own words:

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<sup>14</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches," 182. This line of thought draws from Gal. 3: 28 and Col. 3: 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mbuy-Beya, "Women in the Churches," 183.

It must not be forgotten that we are invited all together, women and men, to seek a new way of being Church today. There are certain women, shepherdesses of prayer groups and religious in parish or hospital ministries, for example, who have close contact with the life of the community and with people in search of God. It would be desirable for them to take on certain sacramental ministries such as baptism, the sacrament of the sick, the sacrament of reconciliation, and the role of official Church witness at weddings. One need not even mention the roles of lector or homilist, which are already required. I myself have assumed the responsibilities of pastoral assistant in two different parishes. Any woman with a real responsibility in the Church should be able to be called to this ministry.<sup>16</sup>

As stated earlier, Mbuy-Beya is trying to show that women are already involved in many aspects of ministry in the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. However, she would like to see the Church accept this fact and be very intentional about affirming women's contribution to the life of the Church in a more visible way. Moreover, Mbuy-Beya calls for radical changes that should usher women into areas of ministry currently restricted to men.

These themes are also developed by Oduyoye, who writes from a Protestant experience and perspective. Like Mbuy-Beya and others, Oduyoye advocates for the liberation of women in the church. This, like her challenge to the family, presupposes also the existence of an "unjustifiable" situation to be eliminated. She argues that Christianity has reinforced the "cultural condition of compliance and submission" and, as such, has contributed to the oppression and depersonalization of women. Hence, Oduyoye calls the church to task by inviting it to fulfill its role by including in its ministry the challenges posed by African feminist theology. Indeed, while she accuses Christian churches of doing very little to challenge sexism both in church and society, she still holds that the church as an institution is, by its very nature, capable of making a difference through its various ministries. By defining the church as an "organization for performing Christ-like functions in the world," she invites what she calls "Western churches in Africa" or the group of churches that participate in the "Euro-American

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186.

ethos" to include women's issues in their pastoral concerns. Like Kanyoro, Njoroge, and others, Oduyoye calls the church to listen and to respond by designing strategies that can enable the church "to deal justly with African women."<sup>17</sup>

As stated above, Oduyoye observes that there is an injustice being practiced toward women in religion, culture, and society.

The language used in describing women in both traditional and modern social structures and the position of women in the economy and the society belie the statement of African men that African women are not oppressed. When I look at the mold in which religion has cast women, the psychological binds of socioeconomic realities that hold us in place, our political powerlessness, and the daily diminution of our domestic influence by Western-type patriarchal norms, I call what I see injustice. No other word fits. I do not wish to be pushed to the point where I must bare my breasts, throw off my clothes, or beat pots and pans in the streets, but as an African woman I do want to be given a hearing.<sup>18</sup>

"I do want to be given a hearing." This is a constant refrain (chorus) in African women's writings. It is a call for the church, and society, to listen to women's stories and concerns. In fact, it is a call for the church to stop ignoring women's hurts and to start being consistent with its claims of being the body of Christ. Closing its ears to the cries of pain, and ignoring the tears of those who suffer, diminishes a sense of community that the church seeks to build and promote. "A church that consistently ignores the implications of the gospel for the lives of women--and others of the underclass--cannot continue to be an authentic voice for salvation. Not until we can say that what hurts women also hurts the entire Body of Christ, will we in truth be able to speak of 'one Body.'" Thus Oduyoye challenges what she calls "the myth that the church brought liberation to the African

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<sup>17</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 157.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

woman."<sup>19</sup> In fact, she strongly argues that the church has also participated in the subordination of African women. She comments: "My criticism of African churches is made to challenge them to work toward redeeming Christianity from its images as a force that coerces women into accepting roles that hamper the free and full expression of their humanity. As with class and race, on issues of gender discrimination, the church seems to align itself with forces that question the true humanity of 'the other' and, at times, seems to actually find ways of justifying the oppression or marginalization of the 'other.'"<sup>20</sup> Like Kanyoro, Njoroge and others, she also points out how the "oppressive" strands of the Bible do reinforce the traditional socio-cultural oppression of women. Oduyoye forcefully goes on to assert that the church should not assign roles based on gender. All the baptized, women and men, should be given a chance to aspire to any vocation in the church to which they believe God has called them (This point has also been an emphasis of Bernadette Mbuy-Beya above).

Claiming the imprint of the Spirit of God on all participants in the faith community, Oduyoye articulates what I think captures the heart of women's expectations from the church, namely, "reciprocity and mutual respect, support and protection of each person's freedom in continuum with our freedom as the children of promise."<sup>21</sup> To accomplish this, Oduyoye insists that the church should open up its structures to unmask the thinking that sets up patriarchal hierarchies and to enable the divine plan for full

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 185.



human relationships between women and men to develop. Indeed, her view of liberation includes freeing both men and women for mutual enrichment in their life journey. She states, "liberation must be viewed as men and women walk together on the journey home, with the church as the umbrella of faith, hope, and love. The church must shed its image as a male organization with a female clientele whom it placates with vain promises, half-truths, and the prospect of redemption at the end of time. Wider vistas of human living are needed here and now."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Oduyoye provides a number of recommendations as to what the church can do to fulfill this vision of the church as "the umbrella of faith, hope, and love." She names the following things: support women's efforts; promote their study meetings; sensitize clergy to gender issues; encourage dialogue across gender lines, and so on. Engaging in such practices will change the church from being a "community in which women are commanded to be stationary," to use Oduyoye's phrase, and men are encouraged to be mobile,<sup>23</sup> to a community in which all have the opportunity to live as interdependent persons capable of participating in all areas of community life--indeed, a community organized around the best of the Christian and African religious and cultural traditions.

To address issues of women's images and roles in the church, pastoral responses must, first of all, support women's call in all aspects of the church's ministry, including ordained ministry. Women's representations of themselves as *called by God* and *filled with the Holy Spirit* to participate in the life of God in the world and in the church must be affirmed and promoted. Indeed, these experiences of God need to be acknowledged

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 108.

and allowed to express themselves fully through the various ministries of the church, including ordained ministry.

Second, pastors and pastoral caregivers will need to orient their pastoral efforts toward sustaining women through their struggles by advancing women's images of themselves in church and society and by calling men continually to assess how the images they have of women and of themselves contribute to the problems in gender relations in the church. Pastoral caregivers and church leaders need to find ways to help men to analyze their own images so as to realign themselves as partners with women in the ministry of the church.

#### **Dealing with Women's Pain and Suffering in the Church**

Nyambura Njoroge (Kenya) has also identified some of the gender dynamics existing in the African church. Njoroge, like Mbuy-Beya, maintains that African women are marginalized, subordinated, and excluded in the African churches. In a very personal tone, Njoroge has identified the pain and anguish she has experienced as a female minister in the Presbyterian Church of Kenya. Thus, her work seeks to address "the pain and anguish that African Christian women experience in the institutional Church."<sup>24</sup> Njoroge bases her analysis of women's status in the church on both her personal experience as one of the first clergywomen to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Kenya, as well as her professional experience as a minister in the local church and other church-related institutions. Reflecting on her early experience in the ministry she comments:

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<sup>24</sup> Nyambura Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing in Labour Pains," in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, ed. Musimbi Kanyoro and Nyambura Njoroge (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), 4.

I have been angry and hurt because I have encountered in my ministry many women in great pain and suffering. Most of the time I felt powerless and ill-prepared to deal with or even to identify with their suffering. I was ill-prepared because my initial seminary training never brought to my attention women's issues and concerns in the life and work of the Church. Neither was I prepared to minister to poor people in situations of extreme poverty, such as in the slums of Nairobi City, Kenya, where I began my parish work . . . . The majority of my parishioners were women whose daily life revolved around the search for basic needs. The living conditions in the slums provided little or none of the security and privacy which middle-class women enjoy and cherish so dearly.<sup>25</sup>

What stands out for me in what Njoroge is saying is the lack of awareness of women's issues and concerns in the life and work of the Church, as well as her own lack of preparation, in her theological education, to deal with women's issues. Coupled with that is the lack of sensitivity to issues of poverty and the lack of economic resources that many of the people she was called to minister to were experiencing. One might say that there was some sort of theological bankruptcy as far as preparing ministers to minister to the realities with which people were struggling. Elsewhere Njoroge has said that this kind of situation in African theological institutions and churches is based on the fact that "most of our churches still depend on the missionary theology emphasizing the salvation of the soul and not the liberation of the whole person."<sup>26</sup> Because for her theology means wrestling with God's Word and confronting the powers and principalities of this world, Njoroge is of the opinion that theology should address problems and issues that individuals and communities face in their daily lives—issues such as patriarchy and sexism that threaten women's lives and diminish their well-being.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>26</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 83.

<sup>27</sup> Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing," 6-7.

Further, Njoroge asserts that her theological training did not prepare her to minister to victims of sexual violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and to prostitutes. She contends that this is a serious lacunae in the training of pastors, as sexual violence and harassment are pervasive in African settings, as they are in many countries around the world. Like her counterparts discussed above, she goes on to insist that violence against women is pervasive in the church as well. She states:

Violence against women is not confined to the home. Escalating cases of rape in society and sexual exploitation and abuse in the workplace are increasing. Worse still, violence against women is known to take place in the church. Here women should be able to turn for help. Instead when they attempt to speak out, they are not believed or taken seriously.<sup>28</sup> This in itself is violence.

Njoroge's argument confirms that the pain and anguish women are going through in the African churches are real. The cost of the church's neglect of women's issues is too high to women's spiritual and psychological well-being. Not believing women's stories of experiences of violence, or not taking them seriously, is clearly a pastoral problem. The church as a healing presence has always been expected to listen to those who suffer and to seek ways to alleviate the pain of those who are burdened by suffering. But here, there seems to be some blindness to women's suffering, and the result is the perpetuation of violence and suffering. The training of pastors who are sensitive to gender issues, and have an increasing awareness of cases of rape, sexual exploitation, abuse, and other forms of relational violence, is a must.

Njoroge reveals in her writings her discovery of how her Church (The Presbyterian Church of Kenya), which pioneered the ordination of women in Kenya, was still far from addressing women's concerns concretely. She laments this reality and complains about how the Church ignores women's issues even though it is known that

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<sup>28</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 81.

women outnumber men in the church, and that their commitment to the life of the Church cannot be disputed.

In her work, Njoroge names a number of issues she encountered in her ministry. I would summarize them as including the following: her difficulty with listening to language that put women down as immature persons who cannot make good leaders; being the only woman serving in her parish session (i.e., church council) for more than five years; coming to the realization of how women themselves had internalized low self-esteem and most of the stereotypes attributed to them by society; becoming aware of the fact that women themselves found it difficult to accept her as their pastor, because of her gender; her own growing feelings of anger and hurt for not being accepted as a minister; her lack of adequate pastoral and theological training to respond to the gender issues she encountered in ministry; and finally, in her continued struggle, experiencing the joy of witnessing women's growth as they slowly started to gain confidence in her, a woman minister. Because they finally trusted in her, they began to

confide their inner secrets: betrayed relationships and broken marriages, bruised ribs and blackened eyes, bloodied faces, attempted suicides. Childless women shared their pain of coping with insults from in-laws and second wives, and the agony of divorce. Widowed women could spend hours telling how they have to struggle to raise several children single-handedly.<sup>29</sup>

Being exposed to the struggles of women in their marriages and families, Njoroge found herself forced to look again at the marriage liturgy, "especially the Church's interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-31." Thus, she states, "I began to question my own understanding of marriage and how I interpret women-and-men relationships. I was hardly aware that I was beginning to read the Bible through the eyes of an African woman."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing," 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Njoroge's list of the problems she encountered in her ministry represents a web of pastoral issues that must be confronted and responded to by the church in Africa. A serious student of African women's theology will see here an aggregate of factors at work, including gender-based exclusive and oppressive cultural norms operative in women's lives and in the church. Njoroge names the ignorance and arrogance of the leadership as some of the possible causes for the exclusion and marginalization of women from full participation in the life of the church. She contends that by excluding women in its governing bodies, the Church perpetuates low self-esteem in women. She also points out the role women play in reinforcing these exclusive and oppressive norms, and how women's "internalized low self-esteem" contributes to this problem.

Indeed, the list of issues that women shared with Njoroge as their minister points to the serious need for gender-sensitive pastoral care--pastoral care and counseling that takes seriously women's issues and seeks to develop pastoral skills that enable pastors and pastoral caregivers to provide effective pastoral care and counseling. This is no easy task. It takes courage and a pastoral commitment to the well-being of all members of the Church. The list of issues presented above supports this dissertation's assertion that without gender sensitivity in the care of women, men, and families, a whole realm of human suffering affecting parishioners will be unattended and the relations between women and men will remain strained. This could undermine the church, as the majority of church goers are women. Most of the issues listed by Njoroge seem to be rooted in a gender ideology that places women in a secondary position, and generates violent behavior against women in the family, church, and society. Being oblivious to these gender-based acts of violence against women is unacceptable for pastors and church

leaders. Indeed, being silent on these issues, whether by choice or because of the lack of adequate theological education, is unacceptable. Pastors and other pastoral caregivers must be adequately trained to address these issues in the church, so they will be able to provide a compassionate pastoral presence, care, and counseling that truly “binds the wounds, heals the brokenhearted,”<sup>31</sup> and calls the perpetrators to account. There is a need for pastors and other church leaders to design study groups that awaken people to the cultural nature of violence against women, and to develop care groups that bring together women who are bruised by gender-based violence, or any other kind of violence, to support each other and to consider possibilities for living lives that are free of violence. Likewise, special attention must also be paid to designing programs that train violent men to unlearn oppressive cultural values that incite them to act and behave violently toward women and children.

Njoroge’s experience and questions about the relevance of her ministry in relation to women’s issues can provide a basis for questioning and evaluating one’s effectiveness, indeed, the church’s effectiveness in ministering to the needs of the people. Ministers need to ask themselves if they are fully aware of the issues of the members they serve in their congregations--both men’s and women’s issues. They also need to ask difficult questions as to how they fit in the ministry of the Church given the kind of issues that their members present to them. Are they equipped to deal with those issues? Are they willing to engage in the process of helping find solutions to those problems?

Njoroge’s experience, though challenging, does not deter her from her ministerial calling. In fact, it deepens her involvement and increases her participation as she seeks to

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<sup>31</sup> Ps. 47: 3-6.

address issues such as women's exclusion from leadership roles, violence against women, and the church's neglect of issues that concern women most in their lives. Like Kasongo, discussed above, she is more resolved to remain in the Church and to engage the forces that keep women on the margins of Church life and work. Thus, having decided to remain in the church, Njoroge accepts the challenge of confronting the patterns and dynamics that create suffering among women, and she invites other women in the church to the same task.

However, Njoroge is mindful of the fact that the kind of changes sought by African women theologians will not come into existence without the participation of all members of the community. Thus she is of the opinion that the involvement of all members of the Church (both women and men) will be a basis on which to build hope for the changes sought by African women theologians. Men and women must work together to "shorten the long and agonizing waiting," because "[this] waiting has lasted too long and the sufferers are too many."<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, "the sufferers are too many." This concern for concrete people and their suffering reveals the pastoral character of African women's theology, and their faith in the power of the Christian community to effect change. More specifically, Njoroge's faith is based on her view that if and when the oppressive and inhibiting cultural and religious norms are eradicated, a better community will come into existence--a community that is truly reflective of the African ideal of communal life where "generosity, mutuality, reciprocity, caring and nurturing new relationships and righting

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<sup>32</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 82.



wrongs [become the foundations of daily living]."<sup>33</sup> However, to build this community, women's voices have to be heard. Their silence in the Church must be addressed. Their invisibility in Church governing bodies, in decision-making processes, in leadership structures, and in theological institutions must be redressed. The violence perpetrated against women must be stopped. The idea of a community that will be supportive of the individuality of both women and men will be fully developed in chapter 5 when I introduce the theological image of perichoresis and its potential for informing and shaping a pastoral care and counseling paradigm that is sensitive and responsive to problems in gender relations raised by African women theologians.

#### **Women's Marginalization in Theological Education and Church Leadership**

African women theologians recognize that women are strongly involved in hospitality and charity work through women's organizations. While they are cognizant of the value of the work done through these organizations, they, however, observe that this is due to the fact that women have not been given opportunities to participate fully in the Church's governing bodies. African women theologians note that one of the reasons why African women are not visible in leadership positions in the church is their being excluded from theological education. They point out that theology has been for a long time an arena of male domination, and that it is difficult to break this kind of tradition. Njoroge, for example, comments on this issue:

Because for a long time theology has been the preserve of men, with a few exceptions, [women's organizations] are coordinated by women who are not theologically trained. It is assumed that women deal with issues which do not require theological articulation. This is not to say that hospitality and fund-raising are not important and that women have not achieved significant contributions [in these areas]. Rather, preventing women from participating in all ministries of the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

church and undertaking theological education is unjust and contrary to the gospel message.<sup>34</sup>

The exclusion of women from theological education is one of the major concerns of African women theologians. African woman theologian Phiri contends that this issue is tied to the issue of women's ordination. Phiri decries clericalism in African churches, and she observes that women have been excluded from theological education because the latter seemed to be reserved for those who are called to ordained ministry--needless to say, those who were "called" to ordained ministry were presumably men. She writes, "Since ordained ministry is mainly reserved for men, most women do not have a chance to study theology. Only a few theological institutions accept women among their staff and students. Most of the few women who have received theological education in Africa have got it through departments of religious studies and/or theology at secular universities."<sup>35</sup>

Phiri, like Njoroge and others, finds this to be problematic. She contends that it is time to open theological education and the ordained ministry to women. This, she believes, would ensure women's involvement in leadership roles as they will be theologically and intellectually equipped to serve in a variety of capacities in the church. But first, Phiri insists that gender issues must be included in theological education because an awareness of, and exposure to, these issues in the church and society will help overcome the numerous hindrances to women's full participation in the life of the church. African theological institutions must be encouraged to include gender issues in the curriculum so that clergy and leaders who come out of those institutions will be made aware of the pain of exclusion, and the spiritual impoverishment that results from such discriminatory practices in the church. Gender sensitive leaders, whether men or women,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>35</sup> Phiri, 74.

will be open and willing to engage what women are saying to the church, thus ensuring long lasting changes in these sensitive areas. In terms of leadership in the church, Phiri contends that the exclusion of women from ordination is not true to African traditional religious practices, nor is it true to African culture.<sup>36</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, for example, contends that

[the] argument about headship is often likened with traditional cultures. In some cultures in Africa men are the heads and leaders of the family. But this should not be given too much importance. In matriarchal societies found in many parts of Africa--such as the Chewa in Malawi and the Akan in Ghana--women's leadership is well recognized. In Akan society, for example, it is the queen mother who makes kings. Hence, the links between headship and culture should not be generalized as applying to all African cultures.<sup>37</sup>

Kanyoro goes on to quote John Mbiti's statement on the openness of the priesthood to both men and women in African traditional religions: "Priesthood as a class is distinct and developed . . . . Training may comprise seclusion from the world, instruction in laws and sometimes possession by divinity. The vocation of priesthood and devotee is highly honoured. It is generally open to both men and women."<sup>38</sup> But it is unfortunate that this tradition of openness to both men and women in religious leadership has not been fully embraced in the church. Phiri comments:

With a few exceptions, African churches have resisted including women in leadership positions. The most common argument is no longer theological but cultural: African cultures do not allow women to lead men. African women theologians are saying that such an argument seems deliberately to ignore African cultures that allowed women to be leaders at shrines as priestesses and mediums, as well as those cultures that have female queens and chiefs. There is then a

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<sup>36</sup> This point is corroborated by numerous studies; worth noting are the work of John Pobee, John Mbiti, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, and others.

<sup>37</sup> Kanyoro, "Ordination of Women in Africa," 150.

<sup>38</sup> John Mbiti, source not given; cited by Kanyoro, "Ordination of Women in Africa," 150; for further discussion of this issue, see also Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 83.

contradiction in the way that the church in Africa has preached about the equality of all humanity in Jesus Christ while in practice excluding women from the Eucharistic ministry.<sup>39</sup>

Phiri goes on to say that what needs to be reconsidered in this area (i.e., the area of ordination and leadership) is our understanding of authority in relation to church ministry and leadership. She strongly suggests that authority and leadership understood in the context of Jesus' ministry should reflect a concern for wholeness and human development inclusive of all members of the church. She states, "Women demand that the church return to a Christ-like understanding of authority and ministry--a demand for inclusiveness in ecclesial ministry and authority that is a quest for human development, a search for wholeness in the church of Christ."<sup>40</sup>

It should be pointed out that Phiri, like Njoroge and other African women theologians, is insistent that it is not enough to bring gender issues to the awareness of the church leadership for there to be change. Women need also to be mobilized and enlisted to the cause of liberation themselves. In fact, Phiri contends that women who have not been exposed to gender issues in the church and society also become hindrances to progress in this area of women's struggle. The campaign to bring change in women's situations should therefore be extended not only to theological institutions and to the training of church leaders; it should also be geared to other institutions of higher education, women's groups, and the family, to name only a few. Such an approach would ensure greater outreach in both church and society. Underlying Phiri's proposed strategy is her awareness of the observation made earlier in this chapter, namely, that women have internalized certain values and norms that continue to keep them in the position of weakness. Thus some women theologians such as Njoroge and others argue that "the greatest challenge African women face is that of unlearning internalized sexist practices,

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<sup>39</sup> Phiri, 73-74.

<sup>40</sup> Phiri, 74.

attitudes, beliefs and patterns.”<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, for there to be change, both men and women need to be sensitized to these issues and enlisted in the project of creating new models of how women and men relate in a non-sexist society. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Njoroge recognizes that this is a lifetime project, and that its success rests upon women and men working together to dismantle patriarchy and sexist patterns upon which it is built.

It can be observed that African women's central concern, among other things, is the quest for gender justice and reconciliation in the church. They believe that such a concern is central in contributing to the development of an authentic church and theology in Africa—i.e., a church and theology which are inclusive of both women's and men's concerns and experiences. Njoroge explains:

We are reminding the church that for too long the Bible, and especially the Pauline writings, has been misused and misinterpreted to subjugate and exclude women. We are reclaiming the fact that Jesus Christ is the sole authority and head of the church and that through baptism, women and men are equally called to repentance and new life. In Christ, we are equally commissioned to share our God-given gifts and to reclaim our God-given identity as female and male created in God's image. This message needs to be repeated over and over, for the church has for too long practiced the subordination of women while at the same time preaching the gospel of salvation for all in Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

This is an important discussion of the nature of the church in relation to Jesus Christ, one that can redefine women's and men's images in the church in such a way that the gifts of all will be fully affirmed for participation in theological education, church leadership, and ordained ministry, among other areas of the life of the church. That is why African women promote women's involvement in biblical interpretation to find models of transformation and healing for all. They deplore the fact that women have not been part of the community of interpretation, preaching, and teaching of the church's faith and

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<sup>41</sup> Njoroge, “Missing Voice,” 83.

<sup>42</sup> Njoroge, “Missing Voice,” 82.

tradition. Njoroge, for example, is concerned with "liberating the Bible from misuse" by designing new ways of doing Bible studies with women. Musimbi Kanyoro is especially interested in the interpretation of scriptures with the aim of using scriptures to empower and affirm women. Such use of the Bible, she believes, will open new venues for women's involvement in the church. She writes:

It has been claimed that African women are not interested in the priesthood; they are content in their present roles. For a long time, a majority of African church women believed and accepted this claim without question. Even the powerful Akan matriarchs were silenced by the scriptures quoted to them. Without themselves being authorities on scripture, church history and law, how could they state their case? But today African women theologians are beginning to address issues of church, the scriptures and theology with new eyes, new questions, new curiosities and new confidence.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, by seeking to be part of the community of interpretation of the Christian faith and tradition, African women's aims include the unlearning of what the church has taught about women, by engaging Biblical stories of women as a way of lifting up Biblical women who were actively involved in God's redemptive activity in the world. Such engagement and awareness is seen as enabling women to wrestle with how Biblical women's experiences inform their lives, presence, and practice in the church. Needless to say, through such endeavors women can claim their rightful place in the church's leadership and, especially, in ordained ministry. This challenge to the church's teachings and interpretation of the Bible and Church practices leads us now to the discussion of the relationship between African theology and the silencing and marginalization of women.

#### The Neglect of Women's Issues in African Theology

Just as Christian theologians (mostly Western male) never took seriously the situation of oppressed people when formulating their ideas, so African male intellectuals, including theologians, have not given much attention to women in their various enterprises.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kanyoro, "Ordination of Women in Africa," 150.

<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 216.

African women theologians have not only called the church to re-examine its teaching and practices, but also its theology--the thinking of the church. Many of the concerns they raise have a theological foundation. For example, African women theologians argue that, having inherited its doctrinal lot from classical Western theology (especially missionary theology and its otherworldly orientation), the African church appropriated patriarchal norms and values that excluded and subordinated women in the church. It received as "revealed truth" what the missionary churches taught about the place and role of women and men in the church.

Thus, African theology, which rose to prominence in the 1960's and early 1970's, inherited these norms as well. As such, African theology developed without taking into consideration women's issues. While it has addressed issues of political and socio-economic oppression and cultural alienation, it has not explicitly included women's concerns in its theological reflection and/or construction. This is, for example, noted by Diane Ramodibe, writing from the South African experience that, "whereas women form the majority of the oppressed, we note with regret that Black theology has not taken women seriously, but has seen theology as a male domain."<sup>45</sup> Some African male theologians have recognized this challenge and are calling other African male theologians and the church to include women's concerns and issues in their theological work. This is the case of Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, who has remarked that "it is a serious indictment of African male theologians that women's issues have not received immediate and unreserved acceptance [in African theological circles]."<sup>46</sup> Maluleke notes that for

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<sup>45</sup> Diane Ramodibe, "Women and Men Building the Church Together in Africa," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 19.

<sup>46</sup> Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (Nov. 1997): 20.

African theology to be relevant to the Christian community in Africa in the twenty-first century, it must include the totality of African realities with which African peoples are dealing. Therefore African theologians from all denominational persuasions, female and male, will need to engage in dialogue. At any rate, African women theologians' call to the church and to African theological institutions is still outstanding. They call the church and theological institutions to re-examine their role in the perpetuation of women's silence and subordination in this important area of faith.

For example, Njoroge, writing from a Kenyan context, maintains that the powers of patriarchy and of hierarchy reinforce each other in the life of the church and in its thinking, as sexist views and practices are so entrenched in the very fabrics of the institutions that are supposed to address the gender imbalance in these areas. She argues that the embeddedness of discriminatory views and practices in the church and in theological formulations render women's voices easily drowned and censored in the service of male domination.<sup>47</sup> Some African women theologians have been very vocal in making it clear that although women and men live on the African continent, the experiences of women in religion and culture are different from those of men. Therefore, it is "no longer acceptable to claim that when African men are writing African theology, they are speaking on behalf of all Africans."<sup>48</sup> Having taken this stand, African women theologians have embarked on a project that focuses on ensuring that the role of African women in religion and culture becomes an academic area of inquiry and study. The aim is to have women do research on women's status in religion and culture, church, and theology, so as to enable women to reflect on their situation in relation to the faith and teaching of the church.

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<sup>47</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 83; and "Groaning and Languishing," 8.

<sup>48</sup> Phiri, 69.



Given the writings that women have already presented to the church, and the challenge they place upon African theology, it is expected that the church will heed African women's call for change and respond in ways that would contribute to bringing about the new kind of church and society toward which they are working. As Njoroge states: "Theological/biblical reflection which does not take seriously Jesus' recognition of women as full human beings lacks credibility and integrity."<sup>49</sup> To correct this, women have developed theological reflections that provide a perspective that is inclusive of both women's and men's issues and concerns. This, they hope, is an important way to contribute to their efforts of mainstreaming women's issues and, therefore, leading the church to listen to women's voices. "Christology and ecclesiology are especially crucial to African women's projects."<sup>50</sup> I believe that the concern with these two important areas of theology is reflective of the lack of sufficient representation of women's voices on these most developed topics in African theology.<sup>51</sup> This, indeed, is indicative of the neglect of women's voices and experiences in African theological enterprises. Oduyoye writes:

African [male] theologians who have used the liberation paradigm to express the church's faith have taken up [issues of] structures of injustice, analyzing class (economics), and race (skin color); they usually ignore gender.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 83.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> To note how African women are minimally represented in the conversations on Christology and ecclesiology, see for example Robert J. Schreiter, ed. *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); John Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, eds., *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology* (Nairobi: Initiatives, 1990).

<sup>52</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 180; see also Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 83.

This is an important observation. The theme of liberation, so central to the African struggle for independence, goes back to the 1950's and early 1960's. African theologians such as Jean-Marc Ela used the term *liberation* in his theological writings before the term became prominent through Latin American liberation theology in the early 1970's. Every serious student of African theology should be aware that the theme of liberation has been one of the major concerns of African theological undertakings from the very beginning of the African theological movement. Therefore, one may wonder with African women theologians why such concern for liberation did not include women's lived experience in African settings.

At any rate, African women theologians have stressed women's participation in doing theology in order to correct the injustices of the church's theological past. Like their male counterparts, they are concerned with the theme of liberation. But, the difference lies in the fact that this time they seek not only liberation from oppressive political, and socio-economic conditions, but also liberation from male domination in the family and the church. They seek liberation from prevailing sexist norms and practices. Njoroge elaborates:

We are yearning for a justice-oriented theology which will take into account all the things that keep women economically and sexually exploited, culturally dominated, and politically alienated. This theology must deal with the fact that the African women are prevented from realizing their God-given humanity and that they are at the bottom of the heap of the most oppressed.<sup>53</sup>

African women theologians have done a great job of calling both men and women to embrace a new relational consciousness that is strongly committed to the building of just relationships, sensitive to the demands and challenges of the new gender awareness. Musimbi Kanyoro, for example, calls both men and women to radically examine "our understanding of God and our relationships together." Having in mind a justice-oriented

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<sup>53</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 83.

theology, she states, "God calls us, women and men alike, into right relationships with each other, with all creation."<sup>54</sup> The construction of "right relationships" leads to the creation of a new community in which all are held in communal care.

Given the kind of community African women theologians have in mind, Kanyoro contends that African women's theology is a gift to the church in that it asks the church to reflect upon how gender history in African societies has shaped people's spirituality, sexuality, worship, and interpretation and understanding of scripture.<sup>55</sup> This quest or challenge aims at making people aware of oppressive norms in gender relations in the church, and as such, calls both men and women to join together to eradicate such marginalizing and exclusivist ways of relating and functioning in the church. Thus, Kanyoro and other concerned African women in theology invite the church to explore and discover new possibilities of being the church and being men and women of faith, bound together by the good news of Jesus Christ. Kanyoro is of the opinion that, if the church listens and responds, the result will be an enriched, strengthened, and faithful church--a church that will become a beacon of life and justice. Therefore, when viewed from this angle, African women's theology is a gift to the church--an opportunity and not a problem, a possibility and not a difficulty.

Clearly, the ultimate goal of African women's call for change is the transformation of church and society toward the building of a healthy human community. But African women's theology maintains that change and transformation cannot happen at a macro level without being rooted first in individuals and in families. The change in question is the change of mind, attitude, and perspective in regard to norms and values that order human interactions across gender and culture. This, in the church, involves deep theological change, among other things. Indeed, theological change is a very

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<sup>54</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 176.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

important factor for the implementation of African women's vision for the church, family, and society. African women's theology has the potential for bringing the new human community into existence--a community that upholds the concerns and well-being of all its members as being integral to its life, identity, and practice of faith. The potentials of African women's theology to shape such a community makes it, indeed, a "pearl of great price" and a gift to the church, as Kanyoro and Njoroge posit. But the church's theological landscape has to change so as to accommodate and incorporate women's perspectives and recommendations.

Another aspect that makes African women's theology a gift of great price is its *pastoral* focus. African women's theology calls for the church to be concerned honestly and unambiguously with issues that disrupt women's lives and hinder them from full participation in the life of the church. It calls the church and its theology not to be neglectful and ignorant of these crucial issues and concerns. The church is invited to listen and hear the pain of women. This is a pastoral approach *par excellence*. Indeed, I do believe that through listening, the church has a chance to redeem, mend, and re-equip itself for effective ministry as it will have a broader repertoire of issues to respond to—hence, rendering it relevant. Gender sensitivity and, in fact, inclusion of women in decision-making, high leadership positions, and inclusion of gender issues in theological education, will bring the church closer to the situations and needs of its members.

Listening is crucial in fulfilling this task. Kanyoro writes:

The so-called "feminist" views have much broader goals which beg responses from the church. The church has a pastoral responsibility to women. We who call one another sister and brother must be willing to listen, and hear the pain of women. To ignore, mock, belittle or categorically denounce feminist theology is not pastoral at all. This is the point at which ministerial formation is challenged. Those called to be God's agents for healing cannot be credible when they cast out some among the flock.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 180.

Kanyoro is absolutely right. The capacity to listen and attend to the experience of persons in need is a mark of faithful pastoral practice. Pastors and other pastoral caregivers are called to mediate the care of God embodied in the faith community to persons in need. Failure to respond pastorally in conveying care when there is an observable and concrete need is indicative of a serious breach with the Christian tradition which is, through and through, replete with stories and incidents of God's redemptive and healing activities through the agency of those who are bearers of the tradition.<sup>57</sup> One cannot claim to be a bearer of this tradition without embodying its essential concern for the well-being and wholeness of all those who seek to be held in the care of God's people. Kanyoro is on target in suggesting that the church needs to encourage theological institutions to incorporate in their curriculum courses that teach methods of ministering to the crucial concerns affecting women's lives.<sup>58</sup> Given the salience of the expressed need for training in terms of awareness, sensitivity, and pastoral skills, the church cannot ignore this reality and still remain faithful to its calling. In fact, its relevance and effectiveness can be seriously undermined.

There is no other way to ensure the church's pastoral effectiveness with women, men, families, or groups in need but to listen and respond to their expressions of pain, suffering, and hope, and creatively to envision or conceptualize adequate strategies that would position the church to clearly show, through its practices and teachings, that it is

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<sup>57</sup> The examples of Moses, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bernadette Chimpa Vita (a 19<sup>th</sup> century Congolese "saint" and heroine who was burnt because she fought against religious and political domination of her people) are stories of divine care and response to situations of need. The church in Africa must stand in this tradition as it listens to women's concerns.

<sup>58</sup> Kanyoro, "Ordination of Women in Africa," 152. Njoroge, "Challenge," 180, has also pointed out the importance of training ministers to acquire knowledge and skills in order to provide effective pastoral support and guidance when faced with many of the issues raised in this chapter.

on the side of those who are excluded, marginalized, neglected, and oppressed. Silence is not a pastoral option. As Kanyoro wonders: "Can we afford silence when people are dying, children and women are raped in broad daylight, young girls are mutilated by female circumcision? African women theologians are asking the church in Africa to be a witness of God's liberation to women in Africa. This is their 'feminism.'"<sup>59</sup> Kanyoro holds that taking into account the issues by listening to concrete concerns will make the church relevant to its context(s) as it will be, indeed, a bearer of the good news to the people in need of its love, understanding, and compassion. Kanyoro, thus, goes on to note and ask: "The witness of the church will not be credible unless we take into account the traumatic situation of millions of women and of the outcasts of our societies. What meaning can faith have in churches that seek to be liberated without sharing the people's battle with the forces of oppression?"<sup>60</sup> This is an important question. It touches at the very heart of the nature and meaning of the faith that the church is called to impart and promote. Implied in Kanyoro's question is the idea that the church cannot fulfill its mission apart from an involvement in the "people's battles." It cannot maintain its place and role in people's lives (particularly those who are marginalized) if it does not confront and challenge "the forces of oppression."

The church needs to be willing to let women's struggles find their rightful place on the "center stage" of its life, along with other major concerns it has. It needs to open itself to listening to the traumatic experiences and cries voiced by its members with a genuine pastoral concern, and it needs to be forceful and intentional in addressing the resistance, within its life, against listening to and embracing cries and calls from its "periphery." Such a stance will demonstrate a clear acknowledgment of the difficulties it faces in regard to recognizing its contribution to women's, and other marginalized

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<sup>59</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 180.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

people's, suffering. Without such openness and acknowledgment, it is hard to effect any change in the issues of concern to African women theologians. That is why Kanyoro maintains that a lack of sensitivity and concern with what women are saying to the church does not provide a hopeful picture toward expected changes. Further, if women's contribution is not acknowledged, and their theological reflection and construction not accepted, it will be hard to improve women's conditions in the church and family. She laments that

neither the local churches nor local theological institutions are willing to welcome our thinking. The libraries in our seminaries have no books on feminist theology. There are only a handful of women teaching in the seminaries and then usually in non-theological areas. Only a few churches on the continent ordain women. The training of pastors is not yet gender-sensitive, and women pastors struggle to minister even to other women.<sup>61</sup>

However, Kanyoro, like many of her counterparts, is not in despair. Despite the challenges facing African women theologians, and women in general, she is hopeful that the increasing awareness of women's issues among women, and also in the church, is indicative of the possibilities for change.<sup>62</sup> African women's theology has already made a remarkable contribution in the empowerment of women to speak for themselves and to name their experiences. The method used in African feminist theology gives women their own voices and space to express the faith in their own terms. This is a great achievement. Indeed, this theology is timely and truly a gift that is equipping women for service and participation in the church. But it must be emphasized again that the struggle continues. African women theologians are committed and relentless in their call to the church to re-examine the fear of feminism that characterizes its attitude toward women's

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>62</sup> I noted above how some African male theologians such as Maluleke are recognizing the value of African women's theology and are calling the church and theological institutions to include women's concerns in their theological programs and projects.

efforts to contribute to the life and ministry of the church. Following African women, I suggest that it is in dealing with its fear of what women's experiences and perspectives represent that the church can free itself truly to listen, respond adaptively, and embrace women's broad vision for the church. Kanyoro, for example, insists that the faith that empowers and liberates is a faith that engages the whole church in people's struggles with issues that are of major concern to them. Indeed, to be true to itself and faithful to its Lord, the church must allow itself, through women's theological enterprises and other prophetic voices, to question the church's discriminatory traditions and practices, in its theology and other norms. By remaining in its fear, and by seeking to preserve its institutional comfort, privilege, and security, the church's ministry will be undermined and its future will be jeopardized. If the church is to preserve itself, it must take the risk to engage people's struggles, listen to the challenges posed to it by African women's theology, and all those who are marginalized in its life and structure. It is in losing its comfort and security that it will "save" its life<sup>63</sup> and become a faithful church--a church that liberates and empowers people for Christian ministry and full participation by all its constituents. Such a church is a church which is willing to be receptive to the gifts of women's theological perspectives by allowing itself to be called by the gospel, under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to "acts of judgment of ourselves and our institutions, which lead to repentance, change of mind and change of structure towards an inclusive communion of saints in the church of Jesus Christ."<sup>64</sup> To ignore this prompting of the Spirit of God is to miss the direction of the church's vocation.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Matt. 10:39.

<sup>64</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 182.

<sup>65</sup> I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6 the necessity for pastoral care to be grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit who is at work in the church and in the world, bringing the whole created order to its final destiny or God's initial aim.



### **Concluding Remarks**

**The analysis of gender dynamics and religious beliefs and practices, among other things, shows that African women are oppressed and marginalized in the church. Because of its historic concern for the well-being of all persons, pastoral care needs to address in a sustained fashion these vital areas of women's experiences and pastoral needs. Pastors and other pastoral caregivers need to: advocate for change in women's subordination in families and churches; promote change in the unjust practices in the socialization of boys and girls which impact gender dynamics in the church; redress the distortions of women's and men's images in culture and religion; promote women's well-being in families, churches, and society; advocate for programs responsive to women's experiences and needs in the church; make a commitment to empower women and men so they will participate in the transformation of oppressive gender relations and engage in the renewal of community between women and men, and children; work toward transforming unequal power dynamics in marriages, families, and churches; address and correct theological beliefs that limit women's participation; and work toward the elimination of oppressive cultural values and practices inimical to women's growth and development.**

**Involved in these tasks of pastoral caregiving is the commitment: to help men and women—and boys and girls—learn to affirm the individuality and personhood of each other; to embrace images of themselves and others that reflect their true nature as children of God; and, to equip them to relate in non-diminishing ways towards one another. I see all these tasks embodied in the central vision of Concerned African women's theological enterprise, namely, "to make more apparent the image of God in African womanhood [and manhood] and affirm [the coming] reign of God in Africa."<sup>66</sup> These ideas will be developed further in Chapters 5 and 6, where I suggest the theological**

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<sup>66</sup> Oduyoye, "African Feminist Theology," 113.

notion of perichoresis as an image that can be helpful in designing a gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling paradigm.

### **Critical Assessment of Some Aspects of African Women's Theology**

The foregoing discussion and analysis of major themes of African women's theology, in both Chapters 2 and 3, have uncovered several concerns of African women theologians. First and foremost, the study reveals that sexism is a central concern of African women theologians. They assert strongly that African women are oppressed by certain cultural and religious values and practices that are inimical to women's well-being, growth, and self-concept. By analyzing the cultural and familial conditions that create and perpetuate unbalanced gender relations between women and men, African women theologians have shown that *sexism permeates all aspects of life* in African contexts. Gender arrangements in the family are shown to be in favor of boys and men, who hold a dominant place and role in most arenas. While the family is presented as a place of love, it is also critiqued for being a place for gender subordination and the subjection of women. Therefore, African women theologians critique and challenge the African family for being a depository of inhibitive cultural practices that oppress women and girls and limit their possibilities for growth and self-fulfillment. The family, which is viewed as a crucible of caring, is also presented as an arena for gender struggle and conflict.

However, African women theologians, in their analysis of gender dynamics, give too much power to the sociocultural context and tradition in the shaping of gender relations. This is one of its limitations. As true as it is that sociocultural forces shape relationship patterns and interactional exchanges, families and individuals have the

freedom to embrace the sociocultural prescriptions or create their own norms for the enactment of gender in families and in interpersonal contacts. Families and individuals must be viewed as subjects who can create specific kinds of gender patterns that are appropriate to their own conditions in their immediate contexts, rather than passive recipients of cultural dictates to conform to cultural images and roles. Each individual and family represents a cultural uniqueness given form by the immediate context. Thus, a tendency in African women's theology to emphasize the influence of the broader cultural context in shaping gender relations underestimates the influence of individuals and the immediate context in which they live. They also neglect to see that family relationships are in themselves cultures in which gender is created, and that human beings are free to choose the kind of life they want to live, sometimes going against what the cultural environment expects of them. For example, some social scientific studies in North America have revealed that women and men in marriages and families take on roles that their immediate context, i.e., their structural conditions, requires. While it is true that women and men are influenced by a broader context in which they live, their day-to-day interactions create a private culture in which they each develop roles specific to their situation. Studies have shown, for example, that it is structural conditions that encourage men to take on child care responsibility and women to relinquish it. That is to say, the fact that the demands of households are great and women are unavailable (because of work outside of the home), leads some men to take on the responsibility for child care and other household activities.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Linda Thompson and Alexis J. Walker, "The Place of Feminism in Family Studies," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (Nov. 1995): 847-65.

**This understanding of gender formation shows the possibility of enforcing individual responsibility for changing oppressive cultural norms in the family and in the larger cultural context. It challenges generalizations about the African family and recognizes the multiplicity of family arrangements based on people's structural conditions in their immediate contexts. It is true that gender is socially constructed. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that this construction occurs at many levels, including social, cultural, and interpersonal levels. It is crucial to attend to these multiple levels if the issue of gender oppression raised by African women theologians is to be addressed adequately. We need to indicate that African women theologians acknowledge the need to address gender issues on these multiple levels of human functioning, but still they tend to focus on the sociocultural and religious factors as having greater influence than the familial and structural conditions. Recognizing the multiplicity of family arrangements would correct the seemingly unitary notion of the African family present in African feminist theological discourse. The diverse forms of the African family would be recognized and analyzed to assess how the various forms of families develop gender patterns, and how these reflect or do not reflect gender patterns in the broader cultural context. An understanding of formative factors in gender relations should give equal attention to individuals and their interpersonal relationships as active participants in the creation of gender attitudes and expectations, even as the influence of the broader sociocultural context (i.e., customs and traditions) is recognized.**

**A study done at the University of Kinshasa in Kinshasa, Congo by Professors Lututula, Ngondo, and Mukeni has revealed that there is a variety of family arrangements**

and structures in Kinshasa.<sup>68</sup> There are families with two parents, families with a single parent (male or female), stepfamilies, and other "new forms of union" with or without children. The average age for persons in the "new forms of union" is usually 32 years for men and 26 years for women. These forms of families, which are also called *unions consensuelles*, constitute "marriage-like" or "family-like" arrangements in which two persons, usually a man and a woman, choose to live together without an official ceremony (legally, religiously, or by "traditional" arrangements). The authors note that families with a single parent, usually a woman, are on the rise in Kinshasa as in other major cities in Congo. Generally these families are a result of women's deliberate choice to live alone with their children, and 16% of families in Kinshasa are female-headed.

I think these various family structures clearly point to the diversity of African families. Gender dynamics in these families are not the same as the dynamics described in Chapter 2. A consideration of the diversity of family life would provide us with information that will reveal other factors that contribute to women's marginalization in certain areas of family and societal life. The study mentioned above shows that among factors that marginalize women and girls in the educational process, economic factors seem to be the most influential as compared to certain cultural norms and practices. When faced with economic hardship, for example, parents' incapacity to support their children's education may result in difficult decisions to choose a child to support (usually a boy), and have the other or others "wait." Lututula et al. suggest that this is one of the factors that contribute to the *sous-scolarisation* (under-schooling or non-schooling) of

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<sup>68</sup> Lututula et al., *Dynamique des Structures Familiales*.

girls and women. They argue that this decision to educate a boy, for example, is not necessarily culturally-based.

Second, there is, in African women's theology, a focus on *the centrality of African women's lives and experiences* in theological construction and reflection. The emphasis on the life experience of women is a theme that stands out in African women's theological enterprise. They value women's experiences as a main source that gives their theological activity its agenda. However, African women theologians seem to overlook the very diversity of women's experience they advocate by generalizing about African women's experiences. The way many speak about women's experiences gives the impression that there is such a thing as the African family, the African church, the African woman, and the African man. The generalizations about women's experience seem to convey the idea that all African women have one and the same experience in their respective families. This is not the case, as there are diverse forms of families with unique dynamics and structures depending on specific factors such as the level of education of husband and wife, their religious commitments, their class, and factors such as women and men working outside of the home, etc. African women's theology will be strengthened when it categorizes African women's experiences consistent with factors such as the urban or rural settings, class, women's professional status, economic status, and the like. For example, market women's experiences in Kinshasa or any other major city in Congo may differ significantly from those of peasant women in rural areas. The latter would also differ significantly from those with college education and those with professional status. These factors, I suspect, shape gender dynamics in families. They should not be relegated to the margins or not considered at all. The study by Lututula et

al. mentioned above, for example, found that in Kinshasa families treated both girls and boys equally as far as their schooling was concerned. No discrimination based on gender was observed.<sup>69</sup> Parents had the same expectations for their male and female children in education. Parents put all their children in the same schools and provided tutors for them. Marriage was valued, but parents maintained that it was not to interfere with school.<sup>70</sup> The experience of males and females in these families would certainly be different from those in peasant families. Indeed, the unitary notion of women's experiences, like that of the family, need to be corrected to attend to the variety of African women's experiences in families and churches. Overlooking the uniqueness and diversity of women's individual experiences in the multiple contexts in which they live and the diversity they represent in family life experience impoverishes our knowledge of the totality of African women's experiences and, therefore, neglects important sources for the empowerment of women and men who are afflicted by oppressive religio-cultural values and practices.

Further, women's experiences need to be categorized, contextualized, and specified rather than generalized. Contextualization and specification would inform good pastoral care based on the particularity of experiences and needs expressed by women and men in their specific contexts. Nevertheless, we need to note that African women theologians draw from the concrete experience of women, and they are cognizant of the diversity that exists as far as women's experiences in families and churches. But they

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<sup>69</sup> This was also my experience in my family of origin where we were all held to the same standards and given the same opportunities for education, even though we each responded in our own way based on our interests and commitments.

<sup>70</sup> Lututula et al., 105.

tend to generalize experiences from specific contexts to all African women, and in the process neglect the particularity of women's experiences in their various contexts. For example, African women theologians speak about how the expectation to marry is one of the pervasive cultural practices throughout Africa. While this is true to some extent, there are those who have found that some societies are "tolerant" of women who choose not to marry.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, while this was an expectation in traditional society, the same expectation does not hold in contemporary Africa where women (and men) spend a lot of time in Colleges and Universities preparing for professional work. Some end up choosing a life of singleness, others marry, but do not want to have children, etc. This diversity must be acknowledged for us to have a greater understanding of women's and men's experience in families, churches, and society. It would be very helpful pastorally to identify which kinds of family patterns are inhibitive to women's (and men's) growth and development. This way, pastoral strategies will be more concrete about how to correct specific attitudes and relationship patterns in specific contexts and situations (i.e., in specific family situations). Not all families are inimical to women's well-being.

Third, most of the studies done by African women theologians on gender relations are analyses of cultural norms, religious traditions and practices, and how they shape gender relations and women's experiences. Since 1989, the Circle of African Women in Theology or Concerned African Women Theologians, for example, holds a Biennial Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture to present research and findings on the status of African women in religion and culture. Most of the papers seem to focus on

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<sup>71</sup> See Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, "Human Sexuality, Marriage, and Prostitution," in *The Will to Arise*, ed. Oduyoye and Kanyoro, 156.



women's images, roles, and experiences as defined within these two arenas.<sup>72</sup> To add to this important enterprise, African women theologians would need to do empirical studies on specific issues and engage in dialogue with social scientific works such as Lututula et al., *Dynamique des Familles et Accès des Femmes à l'Education* and Marie-Josiane Ngimbi, *La Dynamique de la Famille Yombe Face au Travail Salarié de la Femme*,<sup>73</sup> to name only these two. These two examples are empirical studies that focus on specific populations in relation to a specific topic, such as women's access to education and how the professional work of women affects family dynamics. These studies, among others, would be very good dialogue partners for African women theologians, and indeed, for pastoral theologians as they analyze women's, men's, and children's situations and design pastoral strategies to respond to gender problems in African families and churches.

African women theologians' focus on studying cultural norms and traditional values that shape and regulate gender relations makes it difficult, in many cases, to distinguish whether African women theologians are addressing issues and practices in traditional families or the contemporary context. One of the issues that reveals this confusion is the problem of women's circumcision. This issue, one of the recurring problems in African women's theological analysis, is discussed as if it was practiced, and

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<sup>72</sup> See for example the papers from two of these conferences published in Oduyoye and Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise* and Kanyoro and Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith*.

<sup>73</sup> Marie-Josiane Ngimbi, *La Dynamique de la Famille Yombe Face au Travail Salarié de la Femme* (The dynamics of the Yombe family and women's professional work) (Kinshasa, Congo: Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1994).

is still being practiced, in all contemporary African societies.<sup>74</sup> While it is true that the practice of clitoridectomy has caused a number of health problems (physical and psychological) to women in societies where it was practiced, and/or still is being practiced, it would be an overstatement to hold that this rite of passage for girls was or is being practiced in all African societies. I have never heard of such practices in Southern Congo where I grew up. Nor have I heard of such operations being executed in other parts of Congo. In fact, in most ethnic groups in Congo, there was an appreciation of elongated clitoris. Instead of cutting it like in some other traditional societies, women sought to increase its length for more pleasurable sexual activity.<sup>75</sup> There is then a problem in the way some African women write about women's experiences in African families and societies. The pattern of African women's theological analysis seems to be going from analysis of cultural values found in myths, sayings, proverbs, and the ensuing practices in certain milieus to condemning these as realities found in all African societies. There is no problem with this pattern as such. Their analysis has revealed a number of problematic aspects of the socialization process for women and men, and the educational process towards adulthood in some African traditional societies. However, the problem is that some studies done among certain cultural groups are generalized to Africa as a whole, thus giving the impression that all societies practiced, or are practicing, female circumcision, or that all societies socialized, or are socializing, their children in the same manner. Generalizing these practices to the whole of Africa does not reflect reality nor does it do justice to the diversity of traditions and customs found on the African

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<sup>74</sup> See Pacificah F. Okemwa, "Clitoridectomy Rituals and the Social Well-being of Women," in *Groaning in Faith*, ed. Kanyoro and Njoroge, 177.

<sup>75</sup> Mbuy-Beya and Kahungu, *La Femme, la Société, l'Eglise*, 3.

continent. Engaging religio-cultural studies with findings in empirical research such as those mentioned above would concretize more African women's experience, contextualize more of their observations, and affirm the diversity that exists in Africa around gender dynamics in families, churches, and society.

In the following chapter, I will discuss central themes and concepts in family systems theory, showing how they can be used, as heuristic tools, to address the concerns of African women theologians. In Chapter 5, I will provide a pastoral theological analysis of both family systems theory and African women's theology, showing how a combination of insights from these two schools of thought and practice, and insights from pastoral theology, can lead to the conceptualization and implementation of a pastoral care and counseling paradigm that can respond adequately and effectively to the identified problems in gender relations.

## CHAPTER 4

### Family Systems Theory and the Concerns of African Women Theologians

#### Introduction

In Chapter 1 I provided a brief discussion of the wider theoretical context within which the three modalities of family systems theory and therapy selected for this dissertation, namely Bowen theory and therapy,<sup>1</sup> structural family therapy, and contextual therapy, are located. This chapter will expand that discussion by exploring in depth these three schools of family systems theory and therapy. The presentation of each school's theoretical assumptions and basic concepts will be followed by an analysis of the systemic themes in light of the issues and concerns raised by African women's theology in chapters two and three. More specifically, this analysis is intended to show that the Bowenian concept of the differentiation of self, the structural theory's notions of distribution of power and relational boundaries, and the contextual constructs of relational ethics and balance of fairness, among other things, provide us with useful categories for assessing and addressing pastorally issues in gender relations as discussed in the writings of African women theologians.

Before delving into the details of each of the three schools or models of family systems theory and therapy selected for the purposes of this dissertation, let me point out briefly why I selected these three approaches to family systems theory and therapy. As I stated in chapter one, I chose these three theories of family systems therapy for very

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<sup>1</sup> Following Murray Bowen and Michael E. Kerr, Edward Friedmann, and C. Margaret Hall, among others, I am using the terms "Bowen theory" and "Bowenian theory" interchangeably in this dissertation. See Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*; Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*; Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, vol. 2., ed. Alan S. Gurman and David P. Kniskern (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1991); and Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1983).

specific reasons. First, Bowen theory and therapy was selected for its focus on the differentiation of the self as a central element of what it means to relate in a mature fashion to others in a relational system. The concept of the differentiation of the self is particularly helpful as I discuss African women theologians' challenge to those cultural norms that discourage (or overshadow) women's pursuit of individual interests for self-fulfillment and fuller participation (this includes their challenge to what Mercy Amba Oduyoye has called an emphasis on *corporate personality* in African communities). Additionally, the emphasis in Bowen theory on the exploration of the multigenerational transmission processes is especially helpful in envisioning (adequate) measures to address gender dynamics and the values that regulate or undergird them, not only horizontally but also vertically (generation; age; sibling position; seniority in community, etc.). This concept can yield helpful insights in terms of the analysis of women's and men's personhood (or sense of self) and gender dynamics in the church as well.

Secondly, the structural approach's focus on the distribution of power in the family or relational unit, and the importance of maintaining clearly defined boundaries in relationships (both within and outside the family or relational unit) is an insightful framework for examining issues of power and domination (i.e., relational and power dynamics) in the African family and church. This theory also emphasizes flexibility in family and gender roles for there to be a relational balance in family interactions. This is another insightful concept in the analysis of relational patterns and in the envisioning of pastoral interventions.

Thirdly, contextual theory's emphasis on relational ethics in marital and family relations, especially with its focus on acquiring an equitable balance of fairness among

family members, can provide a helpful tool in assessing and responding to gender relational injustices as described by African women theologians. We now turn to a detailed examination of Bowenian family theory and therapy, structural family therapy, and contextual family therapy models of family systems theory.

### **Bowenian Theory and Therapy**

#### **Theoretical Assumptions/General Observations**

The Bowen family therapy model, which is also known as the natural systems theory,<sup>2</sup> was developed in the course of Bowen's research on interaction between mothers and their schizophrenic children in the mid-1950's and early 1960's. Bowen's early work attempted to devise guidelines that would provide a framework for describing and predicting dysfunctional patterns of behavior between a parent and a psychotic child.<sup>3</sup> Specifically he was interested in the exploration of transgenerational processes in the development and maintenance of schizophrenia--i.e., the way in which "overly connected or enmeshed family interactions contributed to poor self-awareness and ego boundaries in schizophrenic offspring."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Murray Bowen, "An Interview with Murray Bowen," in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978), 398-400. Here Bowen specifically points out that his theory draws heavily from biological concepts such as differentiation and fusion. Earlier in his research, he used terms such as symbiosis to describe a mother-child relationship which manifested a lower level of differentiation within the mother and child and/or between them. See also Laura Roberto, "Murray Bowen: Natural Systems Model," in *Transgenerational Family Therapies* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 9-20.

<sup>3</sup> See Murray Bowen, "On the Differentiation of the Self," and "The Use of Family Theory in Clinical Practice," in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978), 467-528.

<sup>4</sup> Roberto, *Transgenerational Family Therapies*, 9.

As his research evolved, Bowen observed similar but less intense patterns in families with less severe emotional impairment. The kind of patterns observed in emotionally impaired families were also found in "normal" families. This led Bowen to direct his efforts away from schizophrenia and toward less impaired human behavior, including individuals and families without clinical problems. There was a shift in his research focus and clinical practice, and his focus became a bit broader.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, it is important to note that Bowen devoted a significant amount of time in his research and clinical practice to clarify the relationship between feeling and thinking issues in relation to mental and/or emotional health or functioning. As Hall observes, "the quality of interplay between feeling and thinking came to be considered one of the most accurate indicators for assessing different levels of emotional integration in individuals and families."<sup>6</sup> This led to an understanding of symptomatic behavior as a manifestation of disorders in emotional systems. Indeed, family processes (which include a complex interplay of emotional processes) were regarded as primary determinants of human behavior--in its healthy or pathological manifestations.

Bowen theory can therefore be viewed as a general theory of emotional processes in human relationship systems.<sup>7</sup> It uses a family systems perspective to examine and understand individual and family behavior. As such, family systems theory can be viewed as a formulation of a general theory of emotional systems. The human

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<sup>5</sup> See Hall, *Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

dependencies and emotional needs found in a family system are also present in work and play networks, neighborhoods, church settings, and in many other kinds of relationships and/or interactional systems. In each of these systems, people function on the basis of well-defined roles and images they have of one another. Just like a family organizes around a parental unit, a child(ren) unit, sibling unit, generation, age, sibling position, and more, work and play networks or churches, are structured around similar patterns. Some people in these systems play a parental role (supervisor, coach, pastor), others a sibling role (co-worker, play partner, or fellow parishioner) or child(ren) role, etc. These dynamics reflect in many respects the emotional needs of participants, and they create or sustain human dependencies which maintain the life and dynamics of the system.

The focus on family and/or relational units as a field(s) of emotional processes makes family systems theory potentially applicable cross-culturally and cross-nationally. Patterns in dynamics of human dependencies and emotional needs characterizing the family can be observed in all cultures and nations. In the case of this dissertation, the focus on family and relational interaction as a field of emotional processes clearly points to Bowen theory's relevance in addressing gender relational issues that African women's theology raises. There is no doubt in my mind that the many issues African women theologians raise are heavily emotional ones, as they touch at the core of women's experience in the family, the church, and the larger society. As such, these issues necessarily evoke emotional responses from men in the family, the church and society.

Bowenian scholar C. Margaret Hall is correct when she states that "a family [system] is a prototype of emotional and social systems."<sup>8</sup> It exerts a strong influence on

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.



the behavior of its members both within and outside of the family system. The patterns of family interaction and the formative role it plays in the shaping of the personality of its members influence "past, present, and future behavior."<sup>9</sup> In order to describe usefully the influence of family interaction on behavior, C. Margaret Hall suggests that the family can be viewed as an ecological unit. The family establishes the most significant emotional climate for the functioning of its members and programs its members to recreate similar emotional conditions and behavior patterns in non-family settings.<sup>10</sup> This is helpful as I approach African women's issues from the perspective of Bowen's family theory, because the recognition of the family's significance in influencing the behaviors of its members can be used to enable the African family to reorient its influence in support of its female members' fulfillment and self-actualization. Hall's analysis points to the significance of the family in the formation of men, women, and children. I can take this further to say that the family has the potential, therefore, for shaping a new kind of woman, man, and child who will be ready to make a difference in bringing about change in the way gender relations are carried out in the African family, church, and society. The family's influential role, when taken very seriously by the church, can be used to exert a strong influence on the church and the general society by designing programs that equip families to be a place where gender relations are more equalized and equitable. Bowenian systems theory supports African women theologians' argument that the emotional processes experienced in the family are also observed in the church and society. Family

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

systems theory, as an emotional systems theory, has a wide application, as social groups such as work, friendship, religious, cultural, and political systems manifest relationship characteristics similar to those of families.<sup>11</sup> As a theory of therapy, Bowen theory's family systems orientation continues to be used in relieving symptoms in individuals and families, and it has helped in precipitating changes in individual and family functioning, as well as in the wider society. As a family theory, its propositions can be utilized successfully in a variety of settings.<sup>12</sup> There are a lot of hurts waiting to be "relieved," as pointed out in Chapter 2 by African women theologians. The framework of Bowen theory, and its propositions, contain resources that can equip the church, through its pastors, to engage the relational and cultural values that cause women's suffering, and begin to design strategies for healing the hurts experienced by women and other marginalized peoples.

### **Basic Concepts**

Bowen family systems theory is undergirded by the following eight interlocking theoretical concepts: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cut-off, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and emotional process in society. Each concept is best understood in relation to the other seven concepts. All these concepts deal with characteristics that apply to the whole system, or to separate segments of the system. Bowen's theory

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<sup>11</sup> This line of thought is adapted from Hall's statement that "[family] systems theory is an emotional systems theory to the extent that social groups such as work, friendship, religious, and political systems manifest relationship characteristics similar to those of families." Ibid., 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

postulates two opposing basic life forces. "One is a built-in life growth force toward individuality and the differentiation of a separate 'self,' and the other an equally intense emotional closeness."<sup>13</sup> These basic concepts, within the context of the two opposing basic life forces, provide a framework for describing the processes in emotional systems--including the family, church, and society. There is a sense in which African women's struggle deals with the two opposing basic life forces that Bowen posits--the lure toward individuality and differentiation, and the push toward closeness or togetherness. I will discuss this later in this chapter. Let us first examine the major concepts of Bowen theory.

The following discussion defines and describes each concept in relation to healthy and dysfunctional processes in emotional systems. These concepts have both theoretical and practical significance in addressing pastorally and theologically relational and family issues presented by African women's theology.

As we approach these notions, it is important to note that Bowen's theoretical concepts are "held together by a premise that subsumes the entire theory, that there is a *chronic anxiety* in all of life that comes with the territory of living," and that this may "manifest itself differently in different species, families, or cultures, and different families will vary in the intensity of chronic anxiety they exhibit, depending on such other variables as basic levels of differentiation and the position a given nuclear unit

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<sup>13</sup> Murray Bowen, "Society, Crisis, and Systems Theory," in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 425.

occupies on their own extended-family tree, but it is essentially the same phenomenon."<sup>14</sup>

With that in mind let us now consider each of the major concepts of Bowen theory.

**Differentiation of self.** The concept of the differentiation of self is the heart of Bowen's family systems theory.<sup>15</sup> Bowen asserts that this concept seeks to communicate that "people are definably different from each other in the way they handle the mix between emotional and cognitive functioning, and the difference is on a continuum from its more intense to its least intense form."<sup>16</sup> In initiating the scale of differentiation idea, Bowen says that he had the goal of conceptualizing the total range of human functioning from the lowest possible level to the highest level of perfection, on a single continuum.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the term differentiation defines the emotional processes that describe the various levels of human functioning. In its early elaboration, Bowen devised a scale comprising a continuum from 0 to 100 to "measure" or "assess" the level of people's functioning in the family or relational unit. People who were classified at the lower end of the continuum were the most undifferentiated.

Bowen's research and study of families with "all degrees of lesser problems," "normal" families, and the "best integrated families" led him to the realization and postulation that people differed remarkably in the way their "feeling-thinking" functions are "fused" or are relatively "differentiated." Bowen writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 139; original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 402.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 405.

At one end of the spectrum are those whose thinking functioning is largely obliterated by the emotional process which governs their lives. Some in this category lead symptom free lives but adjustments are tenuous and they are easily triggered into dysfunction. Poorly differentiated people have a high percentage of all life's problems including emotional and physical illness, social maladaptation, and failures. At the other end of the spectrum are those whose thinking-feeling functions are more differentiated and autonomous. They have more freedom both in emotional and intellectual functioning. They are more successful in life, they have far fewer life problems, there is more energy to devote to their own life courses, and their emotional relationships are more free and intimate. The rest of us fit between these two extremes.<sup>18</sup>

Bowen notes from experience, however, that about 90 percent of the population fits into the lower half of the scale, and that no more than about 10 percent of the population fits into the third segment. He goes on to conclude that "the rest of us fit between these two extremes." As to the possibility of a complete differentiation, Bowen argues that it is practically and theoretically impossible. But the concept's usefulness resides in its having more breadth for thinking about the total human phenomenon in terms of adaptive functioning or emotional impairment and illness.

Further, Bowen postulates that the concept of the differentiation of self includes the recognition of wide shifts in functional levels of self. To explain these shifts, Bowen uses the terms *solid self* and *pseudo-self*.<sup>19</sup> Bowen elaborates,

The solid self is made up of clearly defined beliefs, convictions, opinions, and life principles. Each is incorporated into self, from one's own life experience, after careful intellectual reasoning and weighing the alternatives and accepting responsibility for his own choice. Each belief and principle is consistent with the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 406; and Hall, *Bowen Family Theory*, 17. Hall explains that the solid self is nonnegotiable with others; but the pseudo-self is negotiable with others, i.e., "[a] more differentiated person behaves from a basis of a more fully integrated solid self and less pseudo-self than does a less differentiated person."

others and self will take responsible action on the principles even in situations of high anxiety.<sup>20</sup>

As to the pseudo-self, Bowen suggests that it is acquired under emotional pressure and it can be changed by emotional pressure.

It is made up of random and discrepant beliefs and principles, acquired because they were required, or it is the right thing to believe and do, or to enhance the self image in the social amalgam. The solid self is aware of inconsistency in beliefs but the pseudo-self is not aware. The solid self is incorporated into self in contrast to the pseudo-self which is appended to self. The pseudo-self is a 'pretend' self. It was acquired to conform to the environment, or to fight it, and it pretends to be in harmony with all kinds of discrepant groups, beliefs, and social institutions.<sup>21</sup>

The pseudo-self manifests the lower level of differentiation in that it acts on the basis of emotional reaction to the environment and a high level of anxiety. Its behavior is more automatic as it is largely controlled by emotions and the anxiety of the moment.

Bowen writes:

The pseudo-self is involved in emotional fusion with others, with the loss or gain in "functional" self in the transaction. It is the pseudo-self that is involved in the giving, receiving, lending, borrowing, trading, and bargaining about self with others to gain an advantage; and that uses subtle maneuvering, manipulating, scheming, and plotting.<sup>22</sup>

One can see in this excerpt, as well as in previous statements on the pseudo-self a description of a variety of behaviors that represent degrees of emotional weakness of self and diminished human functioning, according to Bowenian theory. These behaviors and relational patterns can shed some light on the gender issues addressed by African women's theology. Bowen's understanding of a pseudo-self can be helpful in assessing individual and relational functioning both in the family and the church. On the basis of what African women theologians have pointed out regarding women's functioning in the

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<sup>20</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 406.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 407.

family and church, it can be observed that African women theologians' goal, when articulated in Bowenian language, is for women to gain a strong sense of a "solid self." They urge women to examine cultural norms and values on the basis of their own experience and to be able to consider alternatives to their situation and experience, so as to effect change in the interactional patterns that continue to foster a distorted image of who women are and who they can become. African women theologians can be said, in Bowenian terminology, to be about the "differentiation" of women in their families and churches. They would like to see women have "clearly defined beliefs, convictions, opinions, and life principles" which are consistent with who God created them to be and become--free persons who are partners and co-creators of "God's new creation" with men and God. African women theologians have themselves set an example by articulating who women are and what they want to become; and they are calling all women (in church and society) to pursue this vision.

The description of the pseudo-self as presented above could be applied to those women (and men) whom African women theologians say are against the project of (women's) liberation and empowerment because of the norms and values they have internalized. These are women (or men) who, African women theologians contend, have internalized sexist norms, and they are against these liberative efforts which are viewed as a foreign import with no foundations in African realities. Using Bowenian terminology, one may say that these women (and men) have "acquired [these beliefs and principles], because they were required" by tradition, and that those persons who have internalized these discriminatory and exclusive values and practices hold them because they are under emotional pressure to conform to the environment and "to pretend to be in harmony" with the inhibiting beliefs and cultural prescriptions and norms in place.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I will discuss below how the notion of the pseudo-self applies to men who have internalized sexist norms and seek to conform to oppressive cultural images of women and men.

A story and song from Oduyoye's book *Daughters of Anowa* discussed in Chapter 2 may illustrate this situation.<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye describes a situation in which girls were playing a cultural game that made them feel uncomfortable. When "a voice" asked participants how they were feeling, they indicated that it felt miserable. But, they chose to remain in "fetters" (as Oduyoye puts it), in order to honor the traditions and practices of "my father's and mother's town." As I have observed in Chapter 2, the song indicates that there is an option for the players to get out of the game (and therefore experience relief), or to stay in it and deal with the pain. For example, to the question addressed to the players, "Fatima, doesn't that hurt?" The players respond, "Sure! I am miserable." A follow-up statement pursues, "Then, pull it out!" But the girls playing the game respond, "No, I may not do that. It is the practice of my father's town/It is the practice of my mother's town." What we see here is respect and veneration for the tradition. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem is that the players in this game are experiencing distress, but (as I have indicated above) stay in the game in order to honor the tradition of their parents. One may see in this story an illustration of what the Bowenian notion of the pseudo-self stipulates. The girls in this game stay in it because they are pressured by culture and tradition to uphold cultural practices that they have received, so to speak, from their parents. Broadly stated, even if the beliefs and principles are inconsistent with one's outlook and experiences in life, one is expected to accept them because "it is what everyone practices and values," supposedly. But the question remains, though, in the case of participants in the game being considered, whether these players accept the tradition as it is in order "to enhance [their] self image in the social amalgam," as Bowen suggests. My sense is that this is not the case. African women theologians may contend that the girls have been traditioned and socialized to comply with cultural norms, and they are expected to honor them even to their own "detriment." There is no clear

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<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 81.



discussion, in Bowenian theory, of how people can honor both the self (i.e., one's individuality) and the tradition. Perhaps Bowen theory's obliviousness to the socio-cultural context in its theoretical formulations explains the neglect of or silence on the issue of honoring both self and tradition.

Indeed, African women theologians would like to see women (and men) function as "solid selves." They would like to see both women and men operate and relate to each other with an awareness of how certain cultural norms, values, and practices are inconsistent with their own personal experiences, values, and aspirations in life. More forcefully, though, African women theologians would like to have women engage in "careful intellectual reasoning and weighing of alternatives,"<sup>25</sup> as they make choices that truly reflect their concerns, dreams, and aspirations in life. That is why they strongly urge women (and men) who have been wronged by discriminatory and diminishing cultural practices to engage critically African cultures and traditions in order to identify those aspects of culture that are not conducive to the flourishing of persons and to lift up life-affirming and nurturing elements that promote psychosocial health and spiritual well-being. This way of being and relating the theology of African women seeks to promote is especially warranted in the church setting because the faith tradition beckons us to embrace life and to negate that which deters us from experiencing life in its fullness. The Johanne Jesus says, "I came so that they may have life in all its fullness."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 406. I am using Bowenian terminology here to convey what, in my judgment, is one of the intentions and/or agenda of African women's theology. I have to add, though, that Bowen's focus on "intellectual reasoning" as a mark of emotional and mental health seems to be overstated. Feminist critiques of Bowen have indicated how he promotes "supposedly" male values and ways of relating as a norm for "normal" or mature functioning to the despisement of "supposedly" female values such as relatedness, valuing emotional expressiveness, etc. For an extended critique of Bowenian theory, see for example, Harriet Goldhor's "Is Family Systems Theory Really Systemic? A Feminist Communication," and Michele Bograd's "Enmeshment, Fusion or Relatedness? A Conceptual Analysis," in *A Guide to Feminist Family Therapy*, ed. Lois Braverman (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1988), 47-64 and 65-80.

<sup>26</sup> John 10:10.

Another aspect of the pseudo-self that may be useful from the perspective of the theology of African women is the pseudo-self's involvement in emotional fusion, with the loss or gain in functional self in the transaction.<sup>27</sup> While I am aware that the notion of emotional fusion, as described by Bowen, must be approached with caution, as it might be interpreted differently based on one's culture, I would like to suggest that there is here some helpful insight for addressing African women's issues raised in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.<sup>28</sup> The description of the pseudo-self in terms of fusion seems to apply to African women (and other marginalized persons) in terms of the *loss* rather than the *gain* in "functional self." According to my reading of African women's theology and the issues pertaining to women's experience they discuss, African women are described as not having engaged themselves, even as "pseudo-selves," in "maneuvering, manipulating, scheming, and plotting to gain a self advantage at the expense of [others]." In fact, my reading shows that African women are described as being too much involved in "the giving. . . , lending. . . [and] trading. . . with others."<sup>29</sup> Oduyoye, for example, holding that African women are in bondage to culture, notes that African women's preoccupation "has been with the integrity of family life. We have been content to spoil our children, our husbands, and anyone else who has come our way. The result is that our services are now taken for granted and even demanded." Oduyoye continues, "Yet, when we have carried on even under extreme hurt, we have often been rewarded with more sexist exploitation, a situation in which we are made to believe that it is even more blessed to

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<sup>27</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 406.

<sup>28</sup> Reading Bowen with an African perspective, it seems to me what he is describing as emotional fusion might be viewed as closeness and love in the Congolese context. Rather than being shunned, "emotional closeness" is appreciated as a sign of good family relationships.

<sup>29</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 407.

love others more than ourselves. We forget then that being human is having and exercising a choice.” And she concludes, “judged by traditional reciprocity, we are being most *unaffrican* by loving people more than they are prepared to love us.”<sup>30</sup> These are important remarks that Oduyoye makes. We find in Oduyoye’s remarks the assumed cultural values of self-giving and the Christian values of sacrificial love. Oduyoye calls African women to stop giving of themselves too much to the point of always sacrificing their needs and concerns for the sake of others. From her perspective, to be truly African involves living in a reciprocal fashion whereby one gives love and receives love from those whom one gives love to, and vice versa. She seems to be suggesting that African tradition, at its best, intends to prepare people to love and be loved in kind. In other words, it is not African to receive love without returning it or passing it over to others. Neither is it African to give love to those who are not prepared to give it back or pass it on.

While Oduyoye’s remark intends to challenge women not to love others (especially their abusive husbands) more than themselves, and to exercise their choice, I do not think her idea that African women who love their abusive husbands are being “unaffrican” represents well African ethics. Her comment implies that in African ethics, people love those who love them and hate those who hurt them. This is not the case. Her idea implies a conditional stance in giving and receiving love. Her challenge not “to love others more than ourselves” can be a healthy choice in situations of marital neglect or abuse, but it may not carry the same empowering insights when dealing with relationships between mothers and their children, or women and their siblings, or between women/girls and their parents. These are special kinds of relationships that carry with them marks of sacredness. Even when there are conflicts in these relationships, they cannot be judged on the same principle as wife-husband relationships.

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<sup>30</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 197.

Despite difficulties in the family, one remains always a mother to her children, a child of somebody, and a sister to somebody. This also applies to men, and is true for fathers and children, men and their siblings, etc. One may always feel love towards a relative even when one has been hurt by that relative. This can be the case whether one maintains contact with the wrongdoer or not.

At any rate, we need to note that Oduyoye, like other African women theologians, does not reject the values of giving oneself to others, or the possibility of sacrificing oneself for others in some circumstances. What she is critical about is the emphasis placed on these values in the socialization of African women to the extent that the latter become *preoccupied* with the needs of others to the neglect of their own concerns and needs. This way of being is deemed to be diminishing and unacceptable. Using Bowenian terminology, African women's neglect of their own concerns can be seen as a manifestation of "emotional fusion" (with their male counterparts, children, and the church) and a result of a "loss of a functional self"--a sign of lack of the differentiation of self. However, it is debatable to say that every African woman who shows "excessive" concern and care for others necessarily neglects her own needs and aspirations and, thus, is "fused" and/or experiences a loss of her "functional self," in the Bowenian sense. This view implies that the care women offer to their families is scripted by cultural prescriptions, and that it does not originate in women's choices, motivations, and actions. Further, to say that any woman who shows concern and care for others is fused or shows a loss of her functional self is to negate the existence of genuine love and to trivialize the reality of unconditional love. I see a bias in Bowenian theory in its lack of a positive language for love and life-giving attachment. While it is true that closeness and attachment can induce dysfunction, I do not think that they necessarily can render one dysfunctional, or cause one to lose a sense of a functional self, when they convey deep love. Nevertheless, there is value in Oduyoye's comments. Her challenge convincingly

points to problems in African women's socialization processes, and how the latter foster values, norms, and practices which are oppressive to African women.

In contrast to values that socialize women to be concerned with communal matters and family well-being, Oduyoye, for example, states that men are free to affirm their personal concerns and to pursue their individual dreams. She observes, "[while] women, in their bondage to culture, have been working at the task of replenishing the communal bowl, men have often prepared to seek individual advancement."<sup>31</sup> This is a clear description of how cultural entitlements are gender-based. Indeed, it shows how the cultural values in question foster male privilege at the expense of women's personal aspirations. Oduyoye's discussions of some aspects of marital and family life may indicate what Bowen may qualify as a loss of a functional self. The attribution of children and other aspects of family and marriage life to the husband in patrilineal systems may illustrate this point. Oduyoye maintains that the language used in domestic matters is not inclusive of women, and she suggests that women (in the matrilineal systems) must challenge the traditions that view the family, marriage, children, and family property as belonging to men (and husbands). In fact, Oduyoye calls women to assert their rightful place in the "ownership" of the family and of everything that belongs to the family. She invites women to claim that, "[it] is *our* family, *our* children, not *his* children; we had them *with* him and not *for* him, and it is *our* home if we live there, not *his* house. We are not employees of the males we marry, we are partners. If a human being may be described as belonging to another human being, we both belong to each other. We ought to be able to say, 'we had children for us.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 197.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 204; emphasis in the original.

Clearly, one of the goals of African women's theology can be viewed as centering on the Bowenian notion of differentiation--the differentiation of women in their families and in the church.<sup>33</sup> Although African women's theology does not use the language of Bowen's theory, the expected result centers on achieving women's individuality so that they will function as equal partners with their male counterparts.

However, it should be pointed out that the intended beneficiaries of African women's theological enterprise are not women only. In fact, the theology of African women is addressed to the whole church, including men. Aimed at the redemption and transformation of male-female relationships, among other things, African women's theology seeks to change and transform culturally sanctioned sexist ways of defining men as well. As such, African women's theology may be viewed as seeking the differentiation of both men and women. This is so because African women theologians maintain that for women's lives to change and improve, men must change too. If we use Bowenian language, men will need to see that for them truly to be solid selves and differentiated partners who embody fully the image of God, they must refuse to be socialized into positions of privilege and domination in relation to their female counterparts. To accept such sexist socialization for oneself, from the perspective of the differentiation of self being discussed here, would mean the acceptance of being formed to function as a pseudo-self, one who is pressured by negative aspects of culture to live at the expense of those of the other gender. When this is the case, one becomes an oppressor and perpetrator of the cultural violence decried by African women theologians. Indeed, the notion of the pseudo-self also can be used to describe the oppressors,

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<sup>33</sup> This affirmation, by African women theologians, of the value to differentiate stands in tension and conflict with John Ghunney's insistence that the Bowenian notion of differentiation or individuation would be detrimental when used with the African. African women theologians, rather, may say that the differentiation of women and men would lead to the enhancement of persons and the building of true community between women, men, and children. For a discussion of Ghunney's view, see his "[Pastoral Counseling in] Ghana," 100.

offenders, and perpetrators of all kinds. If we hold the theological assumption that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, women and men, which we do in this dissertation, and that women, men, and children have worth and dignity in the eyes of God, those who practice and promote discriminatory and diminishing norms and practices do not, by definition, live out their true life as children of God.<sup>34</sup> In fact, they may be viewed as not reflecting the image of God within them. As such, they are pseudo-selves in need of true self-differentiation to reflect their true being, that is their likeness to the triune God who created them in God's own image.<sup>35</sup> Change in the way men are socialized and/or positioned in basic relationships is necessary in order to build true community that embodies the best of the African and Christian traditions.

It is important to note that African women theologians' resistance to the push toward fusion or togetherness, to use Bowenian terminology, is not indicative of a negation of African communalism. Their focus on women's individuality does not in any way connote an orientation toward individualism. This can also be said of the Bowenian concept of the differentiation of the self. A differentiated person is supposed to be both "separated" and connected. Indeed, African women theologians are fully aware that individualism leads to isolation, and that it is not reflective of the best of either the African or Christian traditions. African feminist theological literature is replete with statements on the importance of community, and a communal way of life. Nevertheless, they are very clear about what they mean by community and the way it must be organized. African women theologians envision a just and loving community in which the individuality of both women and men is recognized with an understanding that this individuality means being differentiated and yet connected, and that apart from this

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<sup>34</sup> Rom. 8: 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> This line of thought will be developed further in Chapter 5 where I suggest that the triune God is the archetype of all healthy relationships, including relationships between women and men.

connection, individuality may lead to a deadening isolationism; the latter is undesirable in African feminist theological literature. However, African women theologians are very insistent that there cannot be community without the affirmation and promotion of individuality. To use Bowenian terminology, one may see African women theologians as saying that, for there to be real community both women and men must achieve differentiation because true community can come into existence only when there are *well differentiated persons*, i.e., solid selves--separate and connected.

Indeed, when individuals are differentiated (in relation to others) and/or encouraged to function from a differentiation of self perspective, they will be able to give thought to the challenges African women pose to the family and the church, and hopefully will relate in a "non-reactive" way to the issues raised by the latter. Being more differentiated, and behaving in a differentiation oriented way, people will have increased awareness for distinguishing between what cultural values and norms are more supportive of humane goals set forth by African women's theology, and which ones promote diminishing and marginalizing practices. Such a perspective will also lead people to approach African culture in a non-nostalgic way, by questioning and discouraging practices that are supportive and "promotive" of a sense of "pseudo-self" in both men and women.

Bowen's natural systems therapy's concern with increasing the level of differentiation in people does provide good insights relative to our concern with gender issues and their effect on women's, men's, and children's functioning in the family, the church, and society at large. The chronic anxiety posited by the theory may be said to manifest itself in the resistance against possible change in the way things are, and the neglect on the part of the church to listen to the challenges African women's theology poses. The guiding assumption in Bowen theory-- that by helping people control anxiety, and the reactivity to anxiety, their functional level will improve and their differentiation will increase--provides insights for a pastoral program that is geared to



help people to differentiate by providing a context in which they can work on "one's own self, with controlling self, by becoming a more responsible person, and permitting others to be themselves."<sup>36</sup> This line of thought is in tune with African women's vision of the new community that encourages and supports both men's and women's flourishing.

**Emotional triangle.** Bowen describes an emotional triangle as a "'natural way of being' for people."<sup>37</sup> As the smallest relationship system in families and other social settings, a triangle is the basic unit of interdependence and interaction in a family emotional system.<sup>38</sup> As such it refers to three parts of an emotional system that may include either three individuals or two persons and an issue. It is also referred to as a three-person system.<sup>39</sup> Bowen states:

When anxiety is low and external conditions are ideal, the back and forth flow of emotion in a twosome can be calm and comfortable. One could refer to this as the ideal or the "normal" state for a two-person relationship. However, the human situation does not remain ideal for long, even under the best conditions when both people are fairly stable. The two person relationship is unstable in that it has a low tolerance for anxiety and it is easily disturbed by emotional forces within the twosome and by relationship forces from outside the twosome. When anxiety increases, the emotional flow in a twosome intensifies and the relationship becomes uncomfortable. When the intensity reaches a certain level the twosome predictably and automatically involves a vulnerable third person in the emotional issue. The twosome might "reach out" and pull in the other person, the emotions might "overflow" to the third person, or the third person might be emotionally programmed to initiate the involvement. With involvement of the third person,

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<sup>36</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 409.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>38</sup> Bowen acknowledges that the couple is the smallest relationship unit, but he argues that rarely is the relationship between two people "undisturbed" by emotional forces from outside of the relationship.

<sup>39</sup> See Hall, *Bowen Family Theory*, 17; and Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 150.

the anxiety level decreases. When anxiety in the triangle subsides, the emotional configuration returns to a calm twosome and an outsider.<sup>40</sup>

What Bowen wants to convey here is that a two-person relationship is unstable and it automatically becomes a three-person system under stress. Such an emotional system can engage in a constant state of movements as the most uncomfortable person tries to establish a more comfortable state of emotional closeness-distance. And he adds that, "the term triangle defines the fact that emotional forces flow back and forth between three poles."<sup>41</sup> Edwin Friedman says that Bowen theory suggests that "triangles form out of the anxiety of two-person systems, that it is impossible for any two persons to maintain the level of differentiation necessary to retain a stable relationship, and that one way of stabilizing a relationship, therefore, is to draw a third party into it, either directly or by discussion. (How long can two people talk to each other without beginning to talk about a third?)."<sup>42</sup> Edwin Friedman goes on to say that the concept of emotional triangle is helpful in providing a method for "linking and operationalizing the others. It has enormous clinical and administrative significance."<sup>43</sup> He elaborates further:

For example, the concept of a triangle can help explain why systems do not change despite reorganization (e.g., centralization or decentralization) if that change fails to affect the relevant triangles. Similarly, the concept of an emotional triangle can go far toward explaining why change does not occur when people enter an old system. What any newcomer to a family or a work system really enters is a set of previously established interlocking triangles, with all the emotional process it conveys. (The fact that triangles do not change when one of the parties leaves also explains why neither death, divorce, nor leaving home usually change family triangles.).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 400.

<sup>41</sup> Bowen, "Society, Crisis, and Systems Theory," 425.

<sup>42</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 150.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 150.

Friedman's analysis provides good insights for the purposes of this dissertation. One of the major concerns for African women theologians is change. African women's theology seeks to bring about change in the way women's issues are dealt with in both family and church. They want to see the African family and church take seriously the challenges posed by women's theology, and especially embrace the vision of a world in which women and men can relate in non-oppressive ways toward each other. This is the guiding agenda of their theological enterprises.

However, as noted in Chapter 2, African women theologians decry the fact that there is strong resistance to changing relational patterns and norms that guide human interactions in society and church. Even when there is change of leadership (the younger generation taking leadership positions in the church for example, and some women acquiring positions of leadership), the changes that are being sought are still difficult to bring about. This is especially observable on the issue of women's ordination. Although some churches have accepted women into the ordained ministry, some local congregations still find it difficult to accept a woman pastor's services and leadership. The concept of an emotional triangle can provide some insight as to why change does not occur even when "new people enter the system." Musimbi Kanyoro has indicated how some constitutions of Lutheran churches on the African continent have been rewritten to include clauses that stipulates unambiguously the openness of the ordained ministry to both women and men. There is even a statement intentionally indicating that the highest level of leadership (i.e., the episcopacy) is also open to women. Kanyoro observes that still many of these churches have found it difficult to make their beautifully written documents into reality. Many Lutheran churches still do not have ordained women as stated in the *revised* constitutions of their judicatories. As stated in Chapter 2, Kanyoro contends that the church in Africa has to deal with the issue of whether what it says about women's leadership role and ordination complies with what cultural prescriptions (in each country) say. It is not easy to change "previously interlocking triangles, with all the

emotional process it conveys." But a good understanding of how these established triangles function with regard to the issues at hand, can equip pastors and church leaders to approach these problems with patience, yet with resolve to see the unhealthy patterns of relating and the norms and practices that generate them brought to their knees.

As far as pastoral practice is concerned, the concept of emotional triangle can yield strategic insights as to how the pastor or church approaches the emotional issues African women's theology raises. As a therapist takes care not to get caught up in the family emotional process by avoiding overfunctioning or being emotionally reactive, the pastor or the church must seek to maintain a non-anxious presence in the triangle (i.e., in the face of the issues that increase anxiety and reactivity in the family and church). Needless to say, such a perspective implies that the pastor and/or the church is (are) already well differentiated for there to be such an assumption. When this is true, the pastoral task will be one of seeking to see how various triangles interlock--i.e., seeing the network of triangles--and how one is caught in one, or an issue, of the triangles constituting a given relational system or field. Indeed, triangles can be found in the African family and church. An awareness about how they function, and what role they play in the flow of emotional energies and forces can provide valuable insights in pastoral strategies and actions in the church.

**Multigenerational transmission.** Bowen defines the multigenerational transmission process as "a very broad pattern in which certain children emerge with lower levels of differentiation than the parents, and others emerge with higher levels of differentiation, while most continue at about the same level as the parents. Those who emerge with lower levels have been exposed to more than an average number of life's misfortunes, and those who emerge with higher levels of differentiation have had more of

life's good fortunes. The fortunes and misfortunes are defined more by the family emotional process than by the usual advantages as defined by society."<sup>45</sup>

What is being conveyed here is that the emotional responses, both their nature and the degree of their intensity, are passed down from "generation to generation." Commenting on this concept, Friedman suggests that the basic affirmation of the multigenerational transmission process is that of "the presence of the past" in the present moment.<sup>46</sup> All generations are part of "a continuous natural process, with each generation pressing up against the next, so that past and present almost become a false dichotomy."<sup>47</sup>

Hall makes a similar point. She maintains that there is "a strong tendency to repeat impairing patterns of emotional behavior in successive generations [which] culminates in lowered levels of differentiation of self for certain members of the younger generations."<sup>48</sup> Conscious efforts have to be made to effect change in these impaired emotional patterns to stop this kind of behavior from being repeated automatically. The issues of gender injustice in the family and the church seem to follow established patterns that cannot easily be demolished. There are those who seek to promote specific cultural norms in order to maintain and sustain continuity with the past. This is seen both in the church and society. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, we discussed how Besha, for example, remarked that some women and men continue to behave a certain way because this is what they always do. They live a certain way because this is what the tradition, or more specifically previous generations, prescribe(s). In the church, there are those who oppose many changes because they would lead to a discontinuity with what they had received from past generations. Knowledge of the dynamics involved in a

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<sup>45</sup> Bowen, "Interview," 410.

<sup>46</sup> See Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 147.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, *Bowen Family Theory*, 18.

multigenerational transmission process can enable an informed pastoral stance and engage the forces of resistance to change in the family, and the church.

With regard to therapy, Bowen theory focuses on coaching someone "[to work] on one's family of origin" in order to gain an understanding of one's origins, and especially to "connect" with "the natural processes that are formatting one's destiny, processes that not only go back for generations, but ultimately to all life's processes since creation."<sup>49</sup> Thus,

researching cut-off; finding lost relatives; correlating dates of change; delineating interlocking triangles; noting similarities of symptoms, issues, and the positions of those who become symptomatic over the generations; or changing one's responses to habitual family interactions, [are not] only useful for obtaining distance from, and (one would hope) gaining more objectivity about, one's present emotional state, [but they are also fundamentally]<sup>50</sup> angles of entry into the universal . . . processes that have formed our being.

In other words, the whole focus of Bowen therapy is to help people to increase their self-differentiation, which helps them deal with anxiety better, by involving them with the basic life processes. In terms of assessing the degree of illness in any given family system, it focuses more on "the structure of the root system than on the immediate fruitfulness or barrenness of its boughs."<sup>51</sup>

As Friedman explains, Bowen theory provides an alternative to what he calls "the myth of the primary site," which assumes that "disease or dysfunction originates in the place in which it first surfaces or to which it can be traced back." He goes on to say that the alternative to that perspective is "not to say that [disease] began in a different

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<sup>49</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 148. Friedman has developed this line of thought further in his book, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

<sup>50</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 148. Cut-off is a stopping of contact with a family member or family members.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

location, but to assume that what is *primary* is not a site but the coming together of necessary and sufficient processes at a particular moment."<sup>52</sup> Friedman, therefore, suggests that the concept of multigenerational transmission process is helpful in gaining new insights in understanding institutional character. Using churches and synagogues as models of any institution, Friedman points out that problem-afflicted churches and synagogues provide a good illustration of the primary-site paradox. The unpleasant churches or synagogues (or "pills," as he calls them), for example, tend to "spit" their clergy out every other year, or twice a year. The excellent or desirable ones (or "plums") tend to have three clergy in a century. He comments that hierarchies tend to think that they can change the unpleasant churches or synagogues by putting in "new, better, healthy, younger clergy." But no change really happens because the emotional processes that generate conflict have not been addressed. He likens this lack of change to the treatment of cancer. "Malignant processes cannot be changed by 'new blood.'" Likewise, the clergy in problem-afflicted congregations tend to bring about change by seeking to get rid of a few "dissidents." Friedman observes that while sometimes they succeed, most often such excision fails as the problem resurfaces several years later "in 'cells' that had never had contact with 'cells' that left."<sup>53</sup> Part of the problem in these conflict resolution strategies is that the focus or emphasis is on the location of the problem or conflict and not on the processes that generate them. The "disease" or conflict does not begin in the primary site. It has its genesis in the "structure of the root system." Therefore, one of the possibilities for addressing conflict in institutions, Friedman

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 149; emphasis in the original.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 149.

contends, is to investigate how the emotional processes (and pathology) of the founding families have been "institutionalized" by any given institution.<sup>54</sup>

This way of perceiving the influence of the multigenerational emotional process has applicability in addressing gender dynamics and power differentials both in the African family and in the church. Exploring how certain norms and values dearly held by the church, for example, have found their way into the church's thought and practice would be of great help in uncovering the emotional processes that produced them. To be true to Bowen theory, I would even say that *being in touch* with the emotional processes of "founding families" (I use this generically as it is difficult to gain access to the relational processes and patterns of all those who contributed to the early beginnings of the church in African settings, or African families for that matter) would shed light on how things are the way they are, and ultimately lead the church to differentiate from its past even as it maintains "contact" with it in a healthy manner.

Emotional system. Bowen describes a (family) emotional system as "the pattern of emotional forces as they operate over the years in the . . . family."<sup>55</sup> Friedman suggests that this concept is interdependent with the concept of differentiation and that of multigenerational transmission discussed above. He even proposes that it is, in fact, "the context that joins them."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Bowen, "Society, Crisis, and Systems Theory," 425.

<sup>56</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 144.



Friedman's definition of this term provides greater clarity and understanding of its relationship to the other concepts. He defines emotional system as

a group of people or other colonized forms of protoplasm (herds, flocks, troops, packs, schools, swarms, and aggregates) that have developed emotional interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which the parts are connected (administratively, physically, or emotionally) has evolved its own principles of organization. The structure, or resulting field, therefore, tends to influence the functioning of the various members more than any of the components tend to influence the functioning of the system.<sup>57</sup>

He goes on to add that a family emotional system includes, among other things, thoughts, feelings, emotions, fantasies, associations, as well as individual and collective past connections of family members. Further, Friedman suggests that this concept involves the family members' sibling position and their experience of fusion and cutoffs within the context of the multigenerational transmission process. It is important to observe here that the *emotional system* concept includes the concepts of *nuclear family emotional system*, *family projection process*, *emotional cutoff*, *sibling position*, and *emotional process in society*. I follow Friedman's lead by including all these notions in the larger umbrella of the *emotional system* concept being discussed here.

The concept of emotional system is primarily concerned with observing levels of differentiation, interlocking triangles, and chronic anxiety. The focus on these dimensions of the emotional system seeks to determine the level of functioning of the individual, the family, or the emotional system itself. The level of functioning is specifically assessed in terms of the role one's position plays in the emotional system. Drawing insights from physics and biology, Friedman argues that "the way constituent particles function is not necessarily according to their own nature alone, but often is due to their position within force fields that encompass them."<sup>58</sup> This means that when their

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 146.

position is changed, the particles will function in a different fashion. When the forces are changed, they will appear to have different natures. Indeed, Bowen's theory, like field theory in physics and biology, emphasizes the forces in the field and the position of various elements within the field (i.e., there is a focus on triangles, multigenerational transmission, sibling position, and especially the "I" position). Bowen's understanding of the emotional system as an "emotional field" indicates his concern and/or interest in the emotional rather than environmental or cultural factors.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the very concept of differentiation, as understood within the context of the emotional field, implies "making oneself aware of the encompassing fields, as well as one's position in them, so that one can make choices."<sup>60</sup>

The role of "position" in one's functioning can yield significant insights in terms of addressing issues of women's status in the family and the church. African women theologians have pointed out that there are cultural values and norms in the African family and church which put women in a "position" of subservience and silence in face of realities that inhibit their full participation. In the context of the family, seniority and gender role expectations and/or distribution of power have a strong influence on behavior. Sexual differentiation in the family seems to take a rigid turn in assigning roles according to gender. People tend to behave in terms of what cultural norms and values dictate. This has applicability to the church as well. African women theologians have decried the fact that some women have internalized the cultural and religious values and expectations which are inhibitive of their participation, so much so that some women strongly resist attempts by other women to change these practices. A Bowenian perspective on this problem would seek to increase the level of self-differentiation in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

women so as to equip them, through this process, to "neutralize some of the programming for the typical expectations of that person's sibling position."<sup>61</sup>

Bowen recognizes that emotional forces in society may make differentiation difficult or impossible to achieve. Togetherness forces in society can be strong enough to lead to the increase of anxiety and ultimately to pervasive display of problem behaviors. Commenting on these dynamics, Hall argues that "[extreme] behavior sequences, such as violence and destructive political leadership, are more likely to occur when the anxiety level of the emotional process in society is high than when less anxiety exists in society."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, an emotional system seems to exert a strong and powerful effect on individual members to conform to established patterns of behavior and dependency within its bounds. But Bowen theory maintains that for the person to be functional in such a "field," he or she needs to be self-differentiated. This level of functioning can be achieved by resisting the pressure (for togetherness) to conform by "changing one's functioning position[s] in the relationship systems."<sup>63</sup> This can be a focus of pastoral action in addressing gender relational issues raised by African women theologians--leading to adaptive strategies of pastoral care and counseling with both women and men.

Another area in which Bowen theory can be informative of the pastoral task is the role of leadership in bringing about change. As Hall suggests, "Bowen's concepts articulate a specific theory of family change and imply a broader theory of social change."<sup>64</sup> The theory maintains that the family is an emotionally interdependent system, which suggests that "change in one part of the system will bring about changes in related

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<sup>61</sup> Hall, *Bowen Family Theory*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

parts and ultimately of the whole."<sup>65</sup> When changes are optimal they create a new level of functioning and increase the level of differentiation for the entire family or emotional system. These changes among women, whether apparent or not, seem to be changing the structures of families and the organization and functioning of the church. Indeed, the many women's organizations being created in secular society and in the church are indicative of the new consciousness, and new kind of women, with which society and the church have to deal. I mentioned earlier in Chapter 2 women's organizations which are concerned with the promotion of women's presence and participation in political and public life. This is a widespread phenomenon on the continent. It points to the change that has already occurred in African societies. From a systemic perspective this means that the whole of African societies is also affected and, as such, is being changed. Women's leadership in this direction of change is obvious but still needs to be acknowledged in church and society. This leads us to another aspect of the notion of emotional system.

Friedman applies the concept of emotional system (or field theory) in his approach to leadership. He calls the leadership based on and informed by this theory as "leadership through self-differentiation."<sup>66</sup> Friedman observes that in his work as a supervisor of mental health professionals, he noticed that whenever members of the helping professions were having difficulty functioning optimally and adaptively or in a "well-defined manner" in their specific institution, the person leading their organizations was "poorly defined." That is to say that the leader was an undifferentiated person who "rarely took stands, a peace-monger, someone without vision, someone who was more a reactor than an initiator."<sup>67</sup> Thus, he notes that these dynamics are at work in many

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 228.

<sup>67</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 146.

organizations, if not all--including the military, religious, educational, business, and family organizations.

In order to address this problem, Friedman asserts that for there to be productivity, and I would add optimal relations in any organization, the leader must be self-differentiated. Thus, he focused his supervisory work with leaders of institutions on teaching them to seek primarily their own differentiation. For him this meant "providing a vision, defining self, working at being a non-anxious presence, [as well as] taking care to remain connected."<sup>68</sup> Friedman assumes that when a leader does all these things, he or she will improve his own functioning, and that such increase in the leader's self-differentiation will have a "systemic effect on the rest of the individuals in the organization, that is, the organizational field."<sup>69</sup> More specifically, when the leader of an organization is well differentiated, individuals in the organization will become better differentiated, and their relationships with one another will improve as well. Leadership through self-differentiation entails systemic ramifications resulting in the increase in the level of functioning of all the elements, as well as the nature of their relationships with one another.

Pastors and other church leaders can benefit greatly from this view of adequate leadership. This can be particularly helpful in light of the issues of gender relations and power differentials raised by African women's theology. If church leaders seek to train and equip leaders to embody the theoretical qualities of a well defined, well differentiated person/leader, there will be a strong foundation on which to promote and/or pursue the changes to which African women's theology point us. Theological education based on

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

such a notion would be helpful in training leaders who are less reactionary and more proactive in designing and implementing the needed changes in church and society.

### Contextual Family Theory and Therapy

#### General Considerations

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy et al. define contextual therapy as "a comprehensive relational and individual therapeutic approach; it is an effective design based on [the] understanding of basic relational structures and processes."<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere Boszormenyi-Nagy maintains that the nature of the relational context is the foundation of therapeutic method.<sup>71</sup>

The term context is defined as "a relational entity comprised of both transactional systems and unique elements that can have no valid substitute without altering the meaning of the whole."<sup>72</sup> This concern with the whole relational field in contextual therapy is translated in its therapeutic concern with relational configurations that encompass "the fairness and welfare interests of more than one contractually agreed-upon client."<sup>73</sup> Included in this are: the client's consideration of the entitlements and merits of all parties concerned; the client's and therapist's accountable commitments to multilateral fairness in relating; leading family members into active pursuit of emotional maturity and integrity; and the therapeutic ability to acquire the skill, experience, and courage to

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<sup>70</sup> Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy et al., "Contextual Therapy," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, 2: 200.

<sup>71</sup> Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations of Contextual Therapy: Collected Papers of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987), 251.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

provide leadership in desperate relational emergencies like suicide, child battering, incest, psychosis, serious delinquency, and destructive scapegoating.<sup>74</sup>

Like Bowen theory and therapy, the contextual approach was initially based on observations of persons with schizophrenia.<sup>75</sup> In the course of these observations, Boszormenyi-Nagy made an epistemological shift, moving from individually focused interventions to a systemic treatment modality. However, it should be pointed out that contextual therapy did not reject internal dynamics altogether. It rather created a therapeutic paradigm which attempted to bring together insights from psychoanalytic object relations theory (especially the thought of Fairbairn), and the thought of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, among others. A guiding paradigm in contextual therapy is the concept of multilateral therapeutic contract which involves an implicitly ethical contractual reorientation to therapeutic work. At the heart of this notion is the assessment of what Boszormenyi-Nagy calls "balances of entitlement or indebtedness."

Contextual therapy emphasizes relational ethics, especially the acquisition of equitable balance of fairness among family members. This concept and other contextual constructs are explained below. Among the four dimensions that make up the relational context and dynamics of family functioning (facts, psychology, transactions, and relational ethics), relational ethics is regarded as the cornerstone of contextual therapy. Emphasis is put on the process of achieving an equitable balance of fairness among family members. The basic life interests of each person are to be taken into account by other family members for there to be a healthy functioning in the family or any relational unit. When this is missing, Boszormenyi-Nagy says that there may be "ethical

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>75</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy focused his work on intensive psychotherapy and research with hospitalized persons suffering from schizophrenia.

stagnation" in the family.<sup>76</sup> When this is the case, the treatment of ethical stagnation should involve three methodological guidelines: ethical re-engagement (exploring the basic life interests and needs of each person); the bridging of manifest adverseness (having each person share their experience of the conflict); and the reassessment of legacy expectations and payments (having each person express expectations of each other). Because the consideration of the welfare interests of each person in family relationships is essential in the treatment of ethical stagnation, the task of the contextual therapist lies in learning how certain facts in a person's relational world are transmitted into ethical obligations—exploration of the availability of trustable relationships; imbalance of fairness; assessment of geographical or emotional proximity or distance; lack of interaction; negative affect; indifferent attitudes, or abuse. Such an exploration seeks to enlist the greatest available human resources for the treatment and prevention of illness or conflict. Boszormenyi-Nagy's theory seeks to utilize the ethical dimension of relationships as a strategic guideline capable of functioning as the integrative factor in all useful psychotherapeutic approaches. The ethical dimension focuses on responsible, trustworthy action in relationships. It includes the consideration of each participant's sense of what it is like to be treated fairly.

As such, the contextual approach introduces a comprehensive relational view of psychotherapy. Thus, it is resource oriented rather than pathology oriented. In Boszormenyi-Nagy's own words, "the contextual approach offers a promising design for preventing individual and relational imbalance and breakdown, by equipping persons to be responsive to each other's needs and interests."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, in its focus on relational ethics and balance, it cautions against seeking "self-serving progress toward 'doing one's

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<sup>76</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations of Contextual Therapy*, 251.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.



own thing."<sup>78</sup> Such relational practice is viewed as a disservice to the self, leading to the fragmentation of a person's vitally needed relational world. This applies to the realm of larger relational contexts, and the human context as well. Boszormenyi-Nagy writes, "[fair] consideration of the interests of others is therefore in the best interests of the individual."<sup>79</sup> The shared human need for trust can be built through this *fair* consideration of other people's interests, and an awareness that an investment in self-serving practices is deceptive and self-defeating. Aware of the deep, often invisible fibers that hold relationships together, contextual therapy advocates for a "multilaterally perceived human context."<sup>80</sup> Thus, a major characteristic of the contextual approach is a multi-centered consideration of the welfare interests of each of the participants in a given context. The family context particularly holds "great therapeutic leverage and is the decisive factor in designing ethically relevant intervention strategies,"<sup>81</sup> because each family member has a sense of what it is like to be treated fairly and to treat others fairly.

As stated above, Boszormenyi-Nagy posits four interlocking dimensions of the (relational) context. They include: facts (destiny), needs (psychology), transactions (power alignments), and merited trust (balance of fairness or relational ethics). These four aspects of the relational context are used in assessing and actualizing relational resources among family members. The contextual approach, therefore, seeks to address interlocking balances that affect all dimensions of relatedness. Boszormenyi-Nagy explains:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 259.

Grounded in relational dynamics as well as in psychodynamics, the contextual therapist identifies relational trustworthiness as the crucial resource for individual health and maturity. His efforts to reinforce the fiber of trustworthiness in significant relationships provide the unifying understructure and the common denominator of tactical measures.<sup>82</sup>

The concept of relational trustworthiness is, indeed, at the heart of the search for balance through relational ethics. That is why contextual therapy aims at enabling people to build trust in relationships. As Boszormenyi-Nagy puts it, "trust building is both the ideological foundation and the primary tool of contextual therapy."<sup>83</sup> This process involves the identification, mobilization, and utilization of residual trust resources among family members, leading to the creation of relational balance. Boszormenyi-Nagy posits the following characteristics as indicative of balance in family relationships: (1) respect for equitability on every member's own terms; (2) integrated give and take in relationships; (3) mutual consideration and "use" of one another; and (4) redistribution of returns from the joint accounts of trust investments. Based on these characteristics, Boszormenyi-Nagy insists that the establishment of interindividual trustworthiness is the basic fiber of durable relationships and the shortest route to eradicating "skewed" and "distorted behavior."<sup>84</sup>

#### Discussion of Basic Concepts

We now turn to the discussion of the four interlocking relational dimensions, namely, objectifiable facts (or destiny), individual psychology (or personal needs), systems of transactional patterns (or power alignments), and ethics of due consideration (also called "merited trust," or "balance of fairness"). According to Boszormenyi-Nagy, these four dimensions of contextual therapy constitute the relational essence of the human

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 232.

condition. Indeed, contextual theories of healthy functioning and dysfunction, the process of change, and clinical intervention are based on the idea that there are *four relational realities* for understanding and constructing the interpersonal world and through it the self.<sup>85</sup> Each of these realities or dimensions represents a relational determinant that informs psychotherapeutic interventions (of all kinds). These dimensions are also elements of human functioning.<sup>86</sup>

**Objectifiable facts.** According to contextual theory, factual contents of a person's destiny include the following elements: sexual (i.e., gender), racial, ethnic, religious, and familial identities. These aspects are part of pre-existing factors, unavoidable conflicts, and consequences. Racial and familial identities, and to some extent sexual identity,<sup>87</sup> are part of the pre-existing factors of identity that an individual has no way of changing. Religious, ethnic, and sexual (i.e., gender) aspects may engage us in some "unavoidable conflicts" based on the legacies of the past. This may be true with issues of religious conflicts, racism, or gender wars. For example, an interreligious couple where the wife is Muslim and the husband Christian may experience unavoidable conflicts when it comes to raising their children, if they choose this path. Each spouse brings to the marriage "legacies of the past" that naturally will result in conflicts if each spouse seeks to influence or convince the other that their religious tradition provides the best guidance about how to raise their children. The unavoidable conflicts "tend to present [family] members with incompatible needs and role demands."<sup>88</sup> The consequences of such interchanges may result in behavioral and emotional symptoms.

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<sup>85</sup> Roberto, *Transgenerational Family Therapies*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Contextual theory's understanding of sexual identity here refers to the sexual "physical marks" (or physiological marks) that define one as male or female; it also refers to gender.

<sup>88</sup> Roberto, *Transgenerational Family Therapies*, 43.

The legacy or heritage of every human being includes inherited demands and expectations. "Efforts to fulfill legacy expectations can occur in a variety of ways, some of which are taught or 'delegated' by the parent generation, and some of which are decided by the offspring's terms."<sup>89</sup> But each person is to some degree obliged to find ways to rebalance and exonerate the shortcomings of his or her family of origin. "No one is intrinsically free of the implications of the filial loyalty and the parental accountability that constitutes life's two fundamental intergenerational legacies."<sup>90</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy goes on to add that the fact of birth into an historically suppressed group imposes its own particular indebtedness. "Here, each person inherits the obligation to care about the specific survival interests and causes of his or her own loyalty group."<sup>91</sup>

This understanding of one's place in relation to the legacies of one's family of origin can be applied to the issues of gender relations and power differentials raised by African women's theology. First, in relation to one's family of origin, one assesses whether the legacy expectations and demands in a particular family are contributive to the fulfillment of the person's dignity and destiny or not. Are the inherited expectations promoting prohibitive values and norms, or are they encouraging the promotion of individual development and satisfaction? Secondly, there is a positive aspect in aligning oneself with the demands and expectations of legacies. This concerns the obligation to care about the specific survival interests and causes of one's loyalty group. This can provide insight and encouragement in the pursuit of African women's efforts toward the dismantling of inhibiting and diminishing cultural and religious practices.

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<sup>89</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 266.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

**Individual psychology or needs.** The inclusion of this dimension among the four conceptual elements of contextual therapy points to Boszormenyi-Nagy's affirmation of individual dynamics as part of the many systemic levels of human experience. Personal psychological factors are not to be ignored in understanding the functioning of relational or family systems. Indeed, these factors do contribute to the strength and meaning of relationships which, in turn, benefit from the degree of complementation between the needs of partners.<sup>92</sup>

Boszormenyi-Nagy argues that the dimension of individual psychology includes the component of trust. Based on Erik Erikson's notion of basic trust<sup>93</sup> as the foundation of the individual's psychological development, he contends that trust and trustworthiness serve as a life-long resource for need satisfaction, stability, and hope. "Without the resources of at least a few trustworthy relationships, people appear much further removed from hope and satisfaction."<sup>94</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy is in agreement with object relations theory's assertion that "the internal object relations theory of psychic functioning holds that 'the deepest functional level of the mind is intrinsically relational.'"<sup>95</sup> Consequently, unfaced and unresolved, unbalanced multigenerational unfairness functions as an intrusive, mystifying element in later relationships. Thus, the contextual approach acknowledges the significance of early development, learning, psychopathology, and other facets of individual psychology. As a result, the task for the contextual therapist

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>93</sup> See Erik Erikson's book *Childhood and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 247-74.

<sup>94</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 270.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 271.

lies in assessing the place of each of these relational dimensions within the context of each person's life.<sup>96</sup>

The development of trust and trustworthy relationships is one of the major concerns of African women theologians. Their project to build a just community hinges upon the creation of relationships that will generate trust in the new community and its "transformed" members who will become committed to the well-being and growth of all. Such redeemed relationships would surely be a basis for hope.

Systems of transactional patterns or power alignments. Boszormenyi-Nagy holds that many aspects of day-to-day existence are manifestly competitive and power-oriented. Like most thinkers in the field of family systems theory and therapy, he demonstrates a concern with the dynamic structures and processes that determine power alignments and interindividual and intergroup struggles for control. This perspective is based on the view that "sequences of transactional patterns and structures are frequently interpreted as sufficient determinants of relational behavior."<sup>97</sup> These relational and interactional dynamics are also manifested intrapsychically in the psychodynamic context of an individual's needs that "requires another individual as a need-object intrapsychically represent[ing] a power arena for unilateral exploitation, possession, and contest."<sup>98</sup> In such a case, individual psychotherapy is aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of one's life by reworking these dynamics so as to bring about a balance of give and take that satisfies all those involved in these relational transactions.

This also has applicability to the concerns of African women theologians. As pointed out throughout Chapters 2 and 3, one of the main goals of African women's

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>97</sup> Jay Haley, *Problem Solving Therapy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976), cited in Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 273.

<sup>98</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 273.

theology is to transform male-female relationships in such a way that men and women will be able to relate in non-oppressive and diminishing ways toward one another. This presupposes the creation of new men and new women who will generate new norms and values that integrate the best of both the African tradition and the Christian heritage--men and women who embody God's new creation through the way they relate to each other, and to creation as a whole.<sup>99</sup> For it is not only male-female relationships that need redemption, but all relationships, including the relationship between human beings and the whole created order. As the apostle Paul puts it, "for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for. . . redemption. . . ."<sup>100</sup> Clearly, the creation of new men and new women will not only benefit gender relations, or human relationships alone. It will also benefit God's creation as a whole. But, for our purposes, let us again emphasize that the guiding modality of new women's and men's dealing with each other will be the give and take which satisfies all those involved in relational transactions. These new men and women will be able to function in non-exploitative, non-domineering and non-possessive ways. Their dealing with each other will reinforce the increase of truthfulness and the creation of trustworthy relationships. This is an eschatological vision *par excellence*.<sup>101</sup> It also has application to race and

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<sup>99</sup> 2 Cor. 5: 17-19.

<sup>100</sup> Rom. 8: 19-23.

<sup>101</sup> Congolese theologian Tshibangu Tshishiku defines Christian eschatology as a "doctrine about the last things, the circumstances of the fulfillment of the individual human being and of humankind, of the definitive establishment of the kingdom of God." See Tshibangu Tshishiku, "Eschatology and Cosmology," in *Cosmology and Theology*, ed. David Tracy and Nicholas Lash (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 27. Nothing can be more fulfilling, in the case of gender conflicts and domination, than the creation of non-domineering, non-exploitative, and non-diminishing relationships. These truly can be trustworthy relationships; indeed, relationships that increase justice and give rise to life.

ethnic relations which are still torn by conflict. The new men and women who are able and willing to relate in non-exploitative and non-domineering ways will hopefully bring their new ways of being and relating, not only to problems in gender relations, but also to racial and ethnic conflicts. Isaiah captures well the eschatological vision when he suggests that in the new peaceful kingdom,

the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.<sup>102</sup>

Pastors and other church leaders who embrace this vision will definitely work toward equipping women, men, and children in such a way that their systems of transactional patterns "will not hurt or destroy" but give rise to life and wholeness in God's kingdom.

Relational ethics: the balance of fairness. This dimension of the contextual approach is regarded as the cornerstone of contextual therapy.<sup>103</sup> Relational ethics is also known as "merited trust" or "fairness of balance" as indicated in the title above. This dimension of the contextual approach is founded on the assumption that each family member is entitled to fair consideration of his or her survival and welfare interests by virtue of his or her birth and existence.<sup>104</sup> Any individual or relational malfunction is viewed as representing a desperate effort on the part of one member to signal an imbalance of trustworthy give-and-take within the family or relational unit. In other

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<sup>102</sup> Isa. 11: 6-9.

<sup>103</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy et al., "Contextual Therapy," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, 2: 204.

<sup>104</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 274.



words, one's malfunction is a manifestation of the search for the missing "merited trust," which is the core determinant of relationships.

According to Boszormenyi-Nagy, entitlement and indebtedness constitute the two end poles on the continuum of relational ethics. When someone does something for his or her partner, his or her entitlement increases. In the same manner, when one's partner is considerate of one's interests, one becomes indebted and compelled to find ways to enable one's entitlement.<sup>105</sup> When there is mutual consideration and exchange, trustworthiness is also created. Boszormenyi-Nagy explains:

[As a relational property] trustworthiness always results from a multilateral investment of relating partners on behalf of their mutual welfare and life interests. Trustworthiness is a characteristic of mature, nonexploitative (object) relations of any kind and, for example, determines whether an exciting love affair can be converted into an enduring marriage. . . . It enables ego strength to be invested in controlling one's tendencies toward an exploitative misuse of close relationships and ultimately serves self-interest through maintaining the relational resource. Furthermore, caring for another person's needs can enhance personal satisfaction through empathy and love.<sup>106</sup>

An important concern in this statement is individual fairness and trust. It is assumed that the degree of fairness in relationships is determined by the relative consideration each partner accords the other. Thus, in the therapeutic work, the therapist seeks to help partners explore and define their own mutual terms for fairness, and the assessment of how each partner is contributing to the development of trustworthiness in the relationship. Given this focus on relational ethics and the creation and development of trust in relationships, the contextual therapeutic goals may include the following: 1) beginning to face intermember fairness and legacies, 2) reducing unfair legacy expectations by acknowledging them and redesigning repayment, 3) correcting one-sided, sometimes distorted, always unaddressed views of each other among family members,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 219.

and 4) rebalancing the give and take among family members by taking initial steps toward personal accountability for responsible action.<sup>107</sup>

Contextual therapy's concern for relational ethics and the balance of fairness can provide insights for responding to African women's concerns discussed in chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation.<sup>108</sup> Its focus on helping people cultivate a sense of concern for each other's well-being, even in the midst of resentment, fears, and accusations, can yield good insights and direction in providing pastoral leadership in situations of domination, exclusion, and marginalization. Indeed, there is a need to address intrinsic unfairness in the family, the church, and the interindividual sources of the chronic mistrust that is characteristic of gender relations in the church, particularly. Contextual therapy provides us with language (the four dimensions) that can be of great help in designing pastoral responses to issues of gender inequities and diminishing relational dynamics. The contextual therapist's role as the elicitor of an intermember dialogue of a trust-enhancing nature, can also be used as a model for the pastoral caregiver, or pastoral leader in general, in the kind of situations described in Chapters 2 and 3. Engaging women and men in dialogue, and having them listen to each other, can be a way of enhancing trust between women and men, and therefore, of beginning to build relationships in which the concerns of each are given a fair hearing.

Contextual therapy's emphasis on relational ethics has some commonality with African women's values on relationship and human existence. As I pointed out earlier, while African women seek to promote women's individuality, they also recognize and value the African emphasis on communality--a sense of connectedness in the midst of individualizing efforts, so to speak. In this sense, interdependence, rather than

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>108</sup> I pointed out in Chapters 2 and 3 that African women's expectations from the family and the church include mutual respect, reciprocity, support and protection of each other's freedom, and the like. See Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 182.

separateness or *individualism*, is the ideal for mature relatedness and existence. This view is clearly in tune with contextual therapy's notion of adaptive human functioning.

Boszormenyi-Nagy et al. explain:

The notion of health, which is basic to the contextual approach, is that interdependence and differentiation are based on consideration of each person's needs and rights. Synergic with feminism, the multilateral perspective and goals of contextual therapy extend into the social realm. The dynamics of the healing process are inseparable from the recognition of social injustice, and thus of social responsibility and social change.<sup>109</sup>

This is a very crucial affirmation. The recognition of the connectedness of interpersonal injustice with social injustice is an important factor that indicates the relevance of contextual therapy in addressing marginalizing practices in the African family and the church. The goals are directed toward benefiting persons as well as promoting changes within systems, including larger social systems. Contextual theory's concern about fairness supports African women's larger concern for the well-being of all persons (male and female), and especially the improvement of the quality of human relationships in the African family and the church. Sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and gender issues (even though it is very minimal), makes contextual theory and therapy a relevant tool for envisioning, conceiving, and implementing specific pastoral plans in response to issues raised by African women's theology.

Indeed, the relevance of contextual therapy for the purposes of this dissertation, among other things, lies in its very foundations. As a theory of therapy, contextual therapy evolved out of the direct response to social, political and economic realities which provided the background for the "overburdened, isolated, and fragmented families" with whom Boszormenyi-Nagy worked in psychotherapy. There is also its primary focus on ethical concerns both within the family and between the family and the larger society. As a resource-based theory, its goal is not to explore pathology, but rather to elicit the

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<sup>109</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 107.

available relational resources (the unused trust resources) to restore balance and fairness among people. As Boszormenyi-Nagy and his colleagues point out, "if one person appears to have done something sadistic, the focus is not on the affect or motive per se, but on how this action affected the balances among people and where the resources are for reparation and for rebuilding trust."<sup>110</sup> In essence there is an underlying concern with reestablishing a balance of self-validation and fair accountability in relation to others and for the sake of others. This is very important in countering social ideologies and cultural practices that require self-sacrifice or promote excessive concern for oneself to the neglect of others' needs. Contextual therapy advocates for the redefinition of the dictates of social practices when necessary.<sup>111</sup>

Another area in which contextual therapy is relevant to the issues raised by African women theologians is that of the role of the contextual therapist. The therapist's task is that of guiding clients toward a fresh assessment of legacy expectations by raising questions of relational balances. The goal in doing so is to be "a catalyst of resources already potentially present when the family comes for help."<sup>112</sup> This is informative of the role of the pastor in relation to gender issues and power differentials in the African family and the church--assessing relational balances in helping families, and seeking to bring this consciousness into the church can be a means through which to bring about change. A pastor informed by contextual theory, like the one shaped by Bowen theory, can be an agent of interpersonal and social change.

However, we must point out some limitations of contextual theory. While I have affirmed the contextual approach's emphasis on preventing individual and relational imbalance and breakdown as a strength of this modality of family theory and therapy, it

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<sup>110</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy et al., "Contextual Therapy," in *Handbook*, 2: 222.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

should be noted that contextual theory's insistence that "fair consideration of the interests of others is therefore in the best interest of the individual" does not reflect most of the experience of African women. I noted earlier in this chapter how African women's preoccupation with responding to the needs of their husbands, children, and/or members of the extended families results in women's services being taken for granted, and even demanded by the culture. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, as quoted earlier, even points out that when we have "carried on even under extreme hurt, we have often been rewarded with more sexist exploitation, a situation in which we are made to believe that it is even more blessed to love others more than ourselves."<sup>113</sup> Clearly, African women's experience points to some limitations of contextual theory's assumptions about the practice of relational fairness. While a fair consideration of the interests of others could be in the benefit of the individual, African women's experiences show that it does not necessarily lead to this end. In fact, it may even lead to being taken advantage of, being demanded to sacrifice more, or worse, to the loss of one's individuality and fulfillment of one's needs and aspirations. Given African feminist theological analysis of African women's experience, the emphasis, as far as the African context is concerned, should be placed on equipping women to affirm their needs and aspirations, and to be able to mobilize the resources available in their families, relationships, and the church to support their interests and goals. Of equal importance, in this regard, is the equipping of men to develop a "fair consideration of the interests" of women in their families, church, and society by developing an awareness of and sensitivity to women's experiences, and how certain cultural expectations have caused harm to women's well-being and sense of self. Designing teaching opportunities and programs to engage men with African women's concerns, at the local congregation level, would be one step in the right direction.

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<sup>113</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 197.

### Summary

From what precedes, the following can be said about contextual therapy. The contextual approach stresses relational factors as resources for individual health and strength; it maintains an interest both in the intrapsychic dynamics and the transactional-communicational systemic emphases of classical family therapy; it is a resource-based orientation to therapy; and finally, trust building is its primary strategy.<sup>114</sup> In our concern for gender justice, the building of trust, therefore, would be a major pastoral concern, if the changes sought by African women theologians, and the pastoral strategy I am proposing, are to be successfully implemented.

### Structural Family Therapy

#### General Observations

Salvador Minuchin defines structural family therapy as "a body of theory and techniques that approaches the individual in his social context."<sup>115</sup> The therapy based on this framework is "directed toward changing the organization of the family. When the structure of the family group is transformed, the positions of members in that group are altered accordingly. As a result, each individual's experiences change."<sup>116</sup>

Structural family therapy was articulated in the late 1960's by Salvador Minuchin. As a theory, it is especially interested in transactions between family members, with a focus on the importance of family organization for the functioning of the family unit and the well-being of its members.<sup>117</sup> This interest in family transactions led Minuchin to

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<sup>114</sup> Boszormenyi-Nagy, *Foundations*, 233.

<sup>115</sup> Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Froma Walsh, "Conceptualization of Normal Family Processes", in *Normal Family Processes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Froma Walsh (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), 26; Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 2, also argues that "[the] theory of [structural] family therapy is predicated on the fact that man is not an isolate. He is an acting and

engage in the study of the structure of the family and its effect on individual and family functioning. Problems in family functioning were viewed as an indication of imbalance in family organization and structural configuration.

Minuchin defines family structure as "the invisible set of functional demands that organize the ways in which family members interact."<sup>118</sup> As to the family, it is "a system that operates through transactional patterns. Repeated transactions establish patterns of how, when, and to whom to relate, and these patterns underpin the system."<sup>119</sup> It is the transactional patterns that regulate the behavior of family members. According to Minuchin, family structure is characterized by a configuration of proximity and distance in relation to each member in the family. A well-functioning family is flexible, and changes its structure according to the dictates of a particular situation.<sup>120</sup> This is not the case with a dysfunctional family, which tends to be more rigid in its structural configuration, no matter what the situation. Minuchin states:

The family structure must be able to adapt when circumstances change. The continued existence of the family as a system depends on a sufficient range of patterns, the availability of alternative transactional patterns, and the flexibility to mobilize them when necessary. Since the family must respond to internal and external changes, it must be able to transform itself in ways that meet new circumstances without losing the continuity that provides a frame of reference for its members.<sup>121</sup>

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family therapy is predicated on the fact that man is not an isolate. He is an acting and reacting member of social groups. What he experiences as real depends on both internal and external components."

<sup>118</sup> Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 51.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Most African women theologians strongly believe in structural change as a way to achieve equality for women (and men) in the family and church.

<sup>121</sup> Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 52.

The existence of "a sufficient range of patterns," available "alternative transactional patterns," and the "flexibility to mobilize them when necessary" are, indeed, central to structural family therapy's understanding of healthy functioning. Positing these family or systemic properties indicate Minuchin's belief in the family's capacity to renew itself and change in the presence of new demands. This affirmation is in line with contextual therapy's focus on the relational resources available in the family or relational unit to effect change in dysfunctional patterns of relating.

I can say of structural family therapy that it is a resource-oriented theory, and like its contextual counterpart, is not so much concerned with diagnosis as it is concerned with the strengths within the relational system for the transformation of dysfunctional relational patterns. African women's theology affirms this perspective. While critiquing the family as a possible nesting place for violence against women, it also recognizes that the African family has the resources and potentials to change relational patterns and values that are inhibitive of women's fuller participation as equals to their male counterparts. African women's view of African culture illustrates this affirmation. African women's theology does not condemn African culture "wholesale," as Musimbi Kanyoro notes.<sup>122</sup> It affirms the existence within African culture of redemptive values and norms that can contribute to the development and maintenance of healthy functioning of the family (in relation to the issues of gender relations and power differentials they raise), as well as the well-being of individuals within the larger context of the family relational system. What African women theologians question or decry is the rigidity of marginalizing and diminishing cultural practices which continue to assert themselves, even as they are being critiqued, and impede the process of change to run its course in light of the new demands brought upon African families, churches, and societies by

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<sup>122</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," in *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action*, ed. Ofelia Ortega (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 52.



African women's movements and other socioeconomic factors. But the resources for change are there. It is therefore a challenge to the church, which has a strong influence in African settings, to find creative ways to mobilize the existing resources for the implementation of changes in gender relations and the promotion of life-enhancing cultural values and norms. African women theologians have paved the way in this direction; the church, and specifically African men, need to follow their lead.

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, it is, indeed, very difficult to bring about change in a system. Family systems theory does recognize this, and it asserts that any system seeks to maintain its balance or homeostasis as much as it can. This means the family is prepared to resist change when pressured by the environment in which it exists. Thus, the range of patterns, and the available alternative transactional patterns that can be used to effect change, are very difficult to tap into when such resistance is mobilized.

Minuchin explains:

[The system] offers resistance to change beyond a certain range, and maintains preferred patterns as long as possible. Alternative patterns are available within the system. But any deviation that goes beyond the system's threshold of tolerance elicits mechanisms which re-establish the accustomed range. When situations of system disequilibrium arise, it is common for family members to feel that other members are not fulfilling their obligations. Calls for family loyalty and guilt-inducing maneuvers appear.<sup>123</sup>

Musimbi Kanyoro tells a story that illustrates very well these dynamics of systemic resistance to changing the church. Her Lutheran denomination in Kenya was one of the early ones in opening doors for women's ordination (although there were no ordained women in that denomination at the time this story emerged). This one occasion, women were preparing to gather for their annual meeting, and they wanted to focus particularly on issues of women's participation in the church. Plans were in the making. Since there was no ordained woman in their denomination, Kenyan Lutheran women invited a Presbyterian clergywoman to come and preach. When denominational leaders received

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<sup>123</sup> Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 52.

this news, they were disconcerted about that prospect. Therefore, they requested that the woman clergyperson who was coming to preach not use the pulpit, nor wear her clergy robe at the occasion. They also insisted that she provide a manuscript of her sermon to them ahead of time (*censure?*). It was an emotional experience for many women involved in this struggle. Indeed, one can see in this story a strong resistance by male church officials to the threat of change, and the possibility of altering transactional patterns in the "normal" and accepted practices of that particular denomination, at that particular period of time. From the structural family theory perspective, one may say that the denominational leaders may have felt that women were not fulfilling "their obligations." The conditions they set up were an attempt to call for "family loyalty."

A systemically informed pastor and other caregivers would do well not to respond in a reactionary fashion to such resistance. He or she would be better served by learning how to work with systemic dynamics so as to mobilize the available resources and relational patterns which are already present (though not apparent) to bring about change. As Minuchin suggests, the alternative patterns are already available within the system. I think, for our purposes, the alternative patterns of relating are found in the African culture and the Christian faith tradition. African women's theology has shown us how to critique these sources, and yet at the same time find within them resources to guide how we relate and deal with one another growthfully and respectfully. Going back to the Kenyan Lutheran women in the above example, the possibility for change, or arguably, change itself, happened as the Kenyan Lutheran women did not invite a male pastor to preach at their event; rather, they invited a clergywoman from another denomination. This was clearly not only a call for change. It was change in of itself. The information that led to this "change" was generated, I believe, from within the context in which they lived. It probably started with one individual's awareness. This is a good example of how change in one individual has ramifications at a macrosystemic level. It begins within a subsystem. It begins with individuals. As Minuchin argues, "[the] family system

differentiates and carries out its functions through subsystems. Individuals are subsystems within a family. Dyads such as husband-wife or mother-child can be subsystems. Subsystems can be formed by generation, by sex, by interest, or by function." He also goes on to add that "[each] individual belongs to different subsystems, in which he has different levels of power and where he learns differentiated skills."<sup>124</sup>

The example of Kenyan Lutheran women, and many other cases of African women's groups and organizations, clearly indicates that the women's subsystem, arguably formed by sex, interest, and function, had learned differentiated skills in relation to its place within the larger church system. Not only did they seek to depart from the system's "preferred patterns" of relating and interacting, but they also sought to enter into new and different ways of relating and being the church. Women who participate in women's consciousness-raising and empowerment groups do truly have the capacity to change the structures of their families, and the church, with the new kind of information they receive and/or generate in women's groups within the faith community context.

It is interesting how the transformation of the structure of a system alters the positions of members within that particular system. It is equally interesting how, by definition, any change in a given system has a "wave effect" on the larger societal system. That is why, cognizant of this fact, structural family therapy's therapeutic goal, in the broadest sense possible, is a generic exploration of the family's patterns, and structure, not only in relation to family members, but in relation to the larger social system as well. As Jorge Colapinto suggests, "[the] purpose of structural theory is to describe the organizational relationships of the parts to the whole in the social ecosystem. [In this

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

sense], the theory allows for a broadly encompassing perspective on the personal and social problems of the family and its members."<sup>125</sup>

This connection between the family and the larger societal context is a two-way process as far as the promotion of relational and cultural patterns that regulate human interaction is concerned. But the family's adaptive or optimal functioning is dependent on its openness to the social context in which it is located. Such openness allows it not only to adapt to new demands, but to promote the well-being and growth of its members as well. Froma Walsh writes:

[The] structural model views the family as a social system, operating within specific social contexts. Three components are emphasized. First, the family structure is that of an open socio-cultural system in transformation. Second, the family undergoes development over time, progressing through successive stages requiring reorganization. Third, the family adapts to changed circumstances in ways that allow it to maintain continuity and to further the psychosocial growth of its members. Symptoms are most commonly a sign of a maladaptive reaction to changing environmental or developmental requirements.<sup>126</sup>

The above statement by Walsh describes a well-functioning family as an open system which is always in the process of transformation as it goes through different phases of its development and contextual circumstances. Such an openness to new information and demands from the environment enables the family to reorganize itself and, as such, maintains its role in furthering the growth of its members.

The view of the family as an open socio-cultural system in transformation anticipates what African women theologians have articulated, namely, that the values and norms that guide relational transactions in the family are historically and socially regulated. They were created to respond to specific circumstances in particular sociohistorical moments. Thus, structural therapy's view of culture as a changing reality

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<sup>125</sup> Jorge Colapinto, "Structural Family Therapy," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, 2: 419.

<sup>126</sup> Walsh, "Conceptualization of Normal Family Processes," 27.

is in tune with African women's theological view of culture as something dynamic, and not static. It views culture as a reality in the service of individuals, families, and societies rather than the other way around. Given the new challenges facing African societies, and families the world over, it is important to support families to formulate "new rules" to guide family relations and individual functioning. This is also true for the church. The African family and church need restructuring for them to foster the growth and well-functioning of their members. However, given systems' resistance to change, good pastoral care and counseling must involve both encouragement to change, as well as respect for resistance.

#### Characteristics and/or Concepts of Structural Family Therapy

Distribution of power. Structural family therapy is characterized by a focus on the *distribution of power* in the (family or relational) system. It recognizes the hierarchical nature of the family and its conferring of higher status to people with greater age.<sup>127</sup> Structural therapy seems to accept the fact, or principle, that systems are hierarchically ordered. Minuchin has, for example, emphasized the importance of generational hierarchy for effective family and individual functioning. This is especially important in relation to raising children. It is believed that there must be a strong parental subsystem in order to perform childrearing tasks. Minuchin maintains that the ideal family functions as a democracy. He goes on to note, however, that "[people] mistakenly assume that a democracy is leaderless, or that a family is a society of peers."<sup>128</sup> For effective functioning there needs to be a leader, especially in intergenerational transactions. Walsh explains:

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<sup>127</sup> Herta Guttman, "Systems Theory, Cybernetics, and Epistemology," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, 2: 53.

<sup>128</sup> Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 58.

As parenting has become an increasingly difficult process in today's complex, rapidly changing world, the unquestionable authority of the traditional patriarchal model has been replaced by a concept of flexible, rational authority. . . . [Effective] family functioning requires authority, the power to carry out essential functions. Accordingly, a primary structural objective in family therapy is to strengthen the parental subsystem and hierarchy.<sup>129</sup>

Walsh goes on to observe that structural family therapy's focus on generational hierarchy and forces in the social context appear to be unaware of the gender hierarchy in families and sexism in the larger culture.<sup>130</sup> Thus, she suggests that "since gender, as well as generation, is a basic structural axis in the family system, therapists must attend to gender differentials in power and status."<sup>131</sup> Walsh goes on to indicate that the feminist critique of structural therapy challenges assumptions that link health with male dominance and with rigid, segregated gender roles and spheres of influence.

African women's theology is in agreement with Walsh's remarks. Given its challenge of male domination in the African family and church, it would want to see pastors and other pastoral caregivers attend to gender differentials in power and status by equipping women and men to distribute power more equally (i.e., allow each other to participate more fully and to one's satisfaction) in the relational units within the family and the church. This aspect should be examined not only in terms of generation, but especially in terms of gender. As to generational hierarchy, this will need to be refined as well for it to serve the purpose of promoting growth and self-fulfillment for participating members. If "generational hierarchy" hampers the individuality of others, and hence, would not contribute to growth of other members of the family or church, it must be challenged to "differentiate," in the Bowenian sense of the word. Pastors and other pastoral caregivers can facilitate this by exploring and uncovering generational

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<sup>129</sup> Walsh, "Conceptualization of Normal Family Processes," 29

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

differences with the goal helping those in generational hierarchies to see their role as one of supporting the growth, participation, and actualization of all participants, and to learn to keep out of other members' way—indeed, to let others be and grow in ways that maximize their potentialities.

**Flexibility and boundaries.** Another characteristic of structural family therapy is the emphasis on *flexibility* in families. It is expected that family members should have the ability to adjust to new realities by organizing themselves into various subsystems "according to the requirements of different situations."<sup>132</sup> Coupled with the ability and flexibility to restructure themselves in various subsystems is the existence of clear and *well-defined boundaries* between family members. The subsystems in the family system may be organized in alliances and coalitions, which structural family therapy recognize as a "fact of family life." As long as there is flexibility in these groupings within the family system, the latter can function adaptively as a whole. Froma Walsh states:

Family boundaries—the rules defining who participates how—function to protect the differentiation of the system. Minuchin has stressed that the *clarity* of boundaries is far more important than the particular family composition. The parental subsystem--whether two-parent or single-parent--must establish generational boundaries to maintain its own psychosocial territory and protection from interference by demands of children and extended family. A parental subsystem that includes a grandparent or a parental child can function well as long as lines of authority and responsibility are clearly drawn.<sup>133</sup>

This is one of the important characteristics of structural family therapy--the maintenance of clearly defined boundaries. It is believed that this is crucial for individual and family functioning because without the establishment of clearly defined boundaries, individuals and subsystems will be unprotected from possible unreasonable, unhealthy or, just simply, excessive demands from other family members. The absence of boundaries

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<sup>132</sup> Guttman, 53.

<sup>133</sup> Walsh, "Conceptualization of Normal Family Processes," 28; italics in original.

would then make it difficult for individuals, subsystems, and the whole family system to function optimally. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, the system must be flexible enough for interchange between autonomy and interdependence. "Both are necessary for promotion of psychosocial growth of members, for maintenance of the integrity of the system, and for continuity and restructuring in response to stress."<sup>134</sup>

Although African women's theology does not use structural theory's language, it is nonetheless clearly concerned with issues of boundaries. Its concern for African women to affirm their sense of self, seek self-fulfillment, and pursue their dreams and aspirations point in the direction of having clear and well-defined boundaries--knowing where they start and where they end, and affirming who they are as individuals. Helping women and men establish boundaries, especially in situations of spousal abuse or other violence, would empower women and men to affirm and maintain their own "psychosocial territory" and protect themselves from the debilitating interference from their spouse. Indeed, establishing boundaries would support and maintain one's integrity and promote one's psychological growth and health.

**Enmeshment and disengagement.** Other helpful notions in evaluating effective family functioning, from a structural perspective, are the concepts of *enmeshment* and *disengagement*.<sup>135</sup> While these terms tend to pathologize patterns of high connectedness or separation that may be viewed as normal in different cultural contexts (see, for example, the emphasis on a sense of community in African contexts), they generally provide us with conceptual tools to assess individual and relational functioning when there is an extreme in one or the other direction. Walsh explains:

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<sup>134</sup> Walsh, "Conceptualization of Normal Family Processes," 28.

<sup>135</sup> Walsh, *Ibid.*, 28, suggests that the words "proximity" and "cohesion" have also been used to describe the reality conveyed by the terms "enmeshment" and "disengagement."



Enmeshment, one extreme, is characterized by diffuse boundaries, blurred differentiation, and pressure for togetherness that interfere with autonomy, privacy, and problem mastery. Such systems readily become overloaded, lack resources to adapt under stress, and show intolerance for separation at normal developmental transitions. At the other extreme of disengagement, rigid boundaries and distance block communication, relatedness, and the mutually protective functions of the family. These extremes of enmeshment and disengagement have been found to be prevalent in severely dysfunctional families.<sup>136</sup>

Given this concern with family structure and flexible intrasystemic configurations, the goal of structural family therapy is "to restructure the system so as to permit the family to deal competently and in a competent and cooperative manner with those life tasks that are most salient at the particular time."<sup>137</sup> As noted above, the notions of flexibility and boundaries are important for African women's goals of seeing women define a clear sense of self in relation to others in the family and the church. This is especially important as they would like for women to be expressive of their pain, joy, and most of all, their desire to pursue personal goals that satisfy their quest for "self" and meaning in life. Having a clear sense of boundaries would enable those women and marginalized persons who have been affected by oppressive practices to affirm their uniqueness, and be able to identify and express more fully what they have to offer and contribute to the life of the community. Boundaries enable this because, first and foremost, they establish, define, and clarify one's "psychosocial territory" and protect the individual from cultural and relationship demands, attitudes, and behaviors that interfere with one's individuality and integrity. Indeed, boundaries define the self and, when used

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 29.

with flexibility, can empower the self to seek self-fulfillment as well as allow others to be who they are and want to become.

As to enmeshment and disengagement, these are clearly not desirable in African women's conceptualization of communal life, (especially in light of African women's affirmation of women's individuality). However, it must be noted that the communal life that African women theologians envision is profoundly African, in that it still seems to be more concerned with connectedness than it does with separateness or disengagement. The latter is not viewed as a desirable or healthy choice.

It is important to note at this juncture that, unlike the Bowen model discussed above, structural family therapy does not concern itself with feelings and emotions. This can be seen as a limitation of this theory. When dealing with gender issues, it is important to take into account how people feel about these issues, as well as help them do something about them. At any rate, in its attempt to restructure the family, it concerns itself with the behavior of family members and how new behavior in a new configuration can bring about the needed change. The restructuring of the system is done in terms of transactional patterns of the family. As such, one can observe clearly that this theory, like the other two discussed above, focuses more on change than on diagnosis.

The role of the structural therapist. Another dimension of structural family therapy that can yield good insights for pastoral care and counseling work, in light of African women's theological analysis, is the *role of the structural therapist*. Among the distinctive features of structural family therapy is the active role it assigns to the therapist as an instrument of change and facilitator of growth.<sup>138</sup> Colapinto observes that the

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<sup>138</sup> Minuchin, 13-14. See also Jorge Colapinto, "Structural Family Therapy," 2: 417.

primary order or mandate for the structural family therapist can be summarized in three words: "Make it happen." This ascribed active role of the therapist requires not only familiarity with the basic tenets of structural theory discussed above, but also a good mastery of the corresponding techniques. Above all, such a role requires the integration of theory and practical aspects of it into the very being of the therapist. I will describe some of the roles ascribed to a structural therapist, with the goal of exploring their relevance in informing the pastoral task in light of the issues raised by African women's theology.

Colapinto identifies the following roles of a structural therapist: producer, stage director, protagonist, and narrator. I will now provide a brief description of each role, and discuss its possible relevance for the pastoral task in situations of gender conflict and relational imbalance.

1. *The structural therapist as producer.* This role involves the production or creation of "the conditions that will make therapy possible--the formation of the therapeutic system."<sup>139</sup> The therapist *joins* the family system in search of family strength by localizing family resources to be used in the construction of alternative relational patterns. These resources will also be used as a basis upon which *to reframe* the problem at hand in terms of relational and family dynamics rather than individual ones. The aim in reframing the problem in systemic terms is to enlist the participation of the whole family in the healing process.

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<sup>139</sup> Colapinto, "Structural Family Therapy," in *Handbook*, 2: 435.

This description of the therapist's role seems to describe what some African women theologians have done. While many of them have pointed out gender problems implicitly or explicitly present in the African family and church, they have also noted the resources available in these settings to effect change and promote the well-being of all members of the family and the church. The pastor who is informed by both structural family theory and African women's theology will identify the resources in his or her religious tradition and culture in order to address issues of relational and structural imbalance so that all members will be able to participate fully in the family and church. This perspective will also be helpful in reframing women's issues in such a way that men, children, and all those who are part of a specific community of faith can be led to see that these issues are not only of concern and benefit to women. Women's issues touch to the very livelihood of every human person interested in his or her own well-being, and the well-being of others.

*2. The structural therapist as stage director.* This role mandates the structural therapist to "create situations that challenge the existing structure and push the family toward more functional patterns."<sup>140</sup> This role does, indeed, describe African women's theological endeavors as well. Their writings do indeed challenge "the existing structure" of family life and church practices. Some African women theologians have forcefully and plainly called their denominational bodies to pay attention to the particulars of women's experiences in the church, and they have proposed guidelines for effecting changes in the area of women's full participation in the church and society. While a structural therapist is a "temporary member of the system," the majority of African

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 436.

women theologians (at least a great number of them) have chosen to maintain a permanent connection or membership in the church. In chapter two, I discussed how many have decided to stay in the church even as they struggle to find their place in its many areas of ministry. Colapinto asserts that as a stage director, the structural therapist "sets up scenarios of enactments," and then he or she goes on to monitor the "flow of transactions" by "directing the family members to interact in novel ways."<sup>141</sup> This is indeed the challenge African women theologians place upon the African family and church. They are calling all of us, and directing us, to examine the flow of our transactions with one another, and to embrace new ways, indeed, novel ways of dealing with each other across gender and cultural lines.

3. *The structural therapist as protagonist.* This role involves the use of the therapist's self by "intervening directly in family transactions, interrupting, pushing, challenging, supporting family members selectively."<sup>142</sup> The goal for such involvement is for the therapist to use himself or herself as a participant in family transactions in order to "effectively [unbalance] the family organization." The African pastor, or pastors in other cultures, have an easy *entrée* in the families of members of their congregations. Therefore, one can argue that pastors have a strategic role in working with families in effecting changes in gender roles. Their strategic role is specifically visible in congregational settings, as well as in communities in which their congregation is located. Given this opening and opportunity, pastors can use insights from a structural therapist's role as a protagonist *to intervene* in family transactions by providing support to those who

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

are struggling with issues of gender relations, abusive relationships, issues of violence, and the like. Pastors can also use their "self" by challenging specific unhealthy patterns of relating they observe in families with which they interact in their ministries. The use of a pastor's self can be particularly facilitative of change in a congregational setting through sermons, Bible studies, special topical studies dealing with relationship and family issues, discussion groups, and the like.

4. Finally, Colapinto proposes the role of *the structural therapist as narrator*. This role views the therapist as a "coauthor, with the family, of a revised 'script' for family transactions."<sup>143</sup> Here the therapist challenges both the family's belief structure or system as well as the transactional structure predicated on that belief system. This role anticipates, as well, African women theologians' activities. A serious reader and student of African women's theology will find a "script" for new ways of being and relating. Their vision is that of ushering African families, churches, and societies in a new era in which men and women will be able to relate to one another in non-diminishing and non-oppressive ways. The role of the structural therapist as narrator is really in tune with the traditional role of the Christian pastor and preacher—he or she is called to present a vision of what can be, and then call God's people to embrace it and live their lives out of that which they have glimpsed in the future of God. In light of the concerns of African women theologians, the future of God may be viewed as involving the building of healthy relationship patterns and supportive communities that facilitate and enhance the growth and well-being of all.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

### **Concluding Remarks**

**The foregoing analysis and discussion of family systems theory and African women's concerns demonstrate the relevance of family systems theory for addressing the problems in gender relations identified by African women theologians. We have highlighted African women's commitment to create relationship values and practices that support women's individuality and the development of adaptive images and roles; their concern to correct the unequal distribution of work in the household and male domination in family relations, and the issue of violence against women, among others. Our discussion has established that the concerns named above can be addressed and responded to effectively by using the Bowenian concept of the differentiation of the self, the structural theory's notions of relational boundaries and the distribution of power in relationships, as well as the contextual constructs of relational ethics and balance of fairness, to name only a few.**

**In the following chapter, I will provide a pastoral theological analysis of both African women's theology and family systems theory as I compare and contrast main themes in these two sources. I will show that a combination of insights from these two schools of thought and practice, and insights from pastoral theology, provide a firm foundation for conceptualizing a paradigm of pastoral care and counseling that responds adequately to problems of gender injustice and oppression.**

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Pastoral Theological Analysis: African Women's Theology and Family Systems Theory in Dialogue**

#### **Introduction**

**This chapter will continue the discussion started in Chapter 4 on the relevance of family systems theory for addressing gender problems identified by African women theologians. That discussion will be expanded by exploring specific ways in which African women's theology and family systems theory can be used in the conceptualization and practice of pastoral care and counseling that attends both to women affected by gender injustice and to the sociocultural values and practices that cause distress to women. African women's theology and family systems theory will be compared and contrasted with a focus on how these two frames of reference may inform pastoral action and caregiving that promote optimal human personhood and true community.**

**The purpose of this chapter is constructive. By discussing the contributions of both African women's theology and family systems theory to gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving, I will show how the main themes of these two schools of thought and practice are in tune with pastoral theological insights and concerns for the human being and her relationships relative to the being and activity of God. African women's theological anthropology will be examined and discussed in comparison and contrast with family systems theory's view of human nature. These will be in turn related to, or discussed in light of, the theological category of perichoresis which characterizes the being and activity of the triune God.**

**Perichoresis is a term that describes the internal dynamics between the three divine persons. It evokes the interpenetration of one person in another, a sense of moving in and through the other. Central to this notion is the image of a divine dance, the dance of Trinity. The Son "indwells" the Father, the Father "contains" the Son, and the Spirit**



“fills” the Father.<sup>1</sup> Because the Trinity has Christology as its premise, Christ is the center of perichoresis. In the divine dance, as Paul Fiddes comments, “the partners not only encircle each other and weave in and out between each other as in human dancing; in the divine dance, so intimate is the communion that they move in and through each other so that the pattern is all-inclusive.”<sup>2</sup>

Perichoresis will be suggested as an evocative theological image that provides norms not only for optimal gender relations, but also for gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving in situations of gender conflicts and oppression. The goals of pastoral caregiving that is shaped by the theological image of perichoresis, in conjunction with African women’s theology and family systems theory, will include the creation of the community in which the humanity, dignity, and worth of women, men, and children will be affirmed, nurtured, and protected. In such a community there is no room for subordination of women, or the male domination of human relationships. Pastoral caregiving that is grounded in this notion has the potential for correcting problems in gender relations identified by the theology of African women and can enable pastors and pastoral counselors to support women, men, and children in their efforts to self-differentiate and participate more meaningfully in familial and social life.

Both African women's theology and family systems theory are deeply concerned with relationships--healthy and meaningful relationships that foster an optimal sense of self and a community that interrelate in adaptive and functional manners. Their concern for individuality and community (broadly understood) may be reflected in Jürgen Moltmann's notion of a perichoretic community--a community that interpenetrates the

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “The Inviting Unity of the Triune God,” in *Monotheism*, ed. Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 72.

self and is interpenetrated by the self.<sup>3</sup> African women's theology and the sociocultural gender critique to which it has given rise reveals the debilitating effects of sexism. African women's challenge to the church (and society) requires that the church respond in healing ways. The image of perichoresis is resourceful theologically and pastorally because, as a category of love, participation, and (relational) justice, it can enable pastoral theology, care, and counseling to challenge unjust interpersonal and social relations, promote modes of being and relating that will correct and heal individual and group suffering and dysfunction. Indeed, I am suggesting the notion of perichoresis as a normative image for gender relations and pastoral caregiving, because I maintain, with African women theologians, that our understanding of God has a great impact on how our relationships together are organized and carried out. It also informs how we practice the tasks of pastoral caregiving.

The discussion of the theological concept of perichoresis, in its description of the nature of relationships within the triune God, provides us with a framework within which to reorder gender relations, promote practices of justice between the sexes, change the organization of family and church, advance the systemic notion of equal regard or balance of fairness in family and church relationships, as well as affirm the differentiation of women and men as a mode of being willed by God. I see the perichoretic understanding of who God is and how God relates to creation as having a fundamental and potentially transformative role. This understanding of God's mode of being, and the related friendship we have with God, shapes and transforms us into the likeness of God in whom there is no relation of domination, subordination, abuse or neglect. Pastoral

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 11, 102, 259. Moltmann suggests that the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity is perichoretic in that each person receives their identity from the other, as they interpenetrate one another and share their specific properties with each other. I will develop this discussion later in this chapter when I talk about African women's quest for a new community.

theology and care concerned with gender injustice would find in the theological category of perichoresis and in family systems theories themes, tools and resources to help individuals, families, and churches align themselves with values that nurture individuality and community and, in so doing, give rise to life. I will discuss later in this chapter how the notion of perichoresis can be used as a basis in developing and practicing gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving. Let me turn first to a comparison of African women's theology and family systems theory from a pastoral theological perspective.

**A Comparison of African Women's Theology and Family Systems Theory:  
A Pastoral Theological Reading**

At first glance, a comparison between African women's theology and family systems theory seems to be far-fetched. The two schools of thought operate from different paradigms conceptually, ideologically, and culturally. African women's theology is based on African women's experience and faith. Family systems theory grows out of clinical work with distressed families in a North American context. It is not faith-based, and gender, as a category of analysis, assessment, and intervention, is largely missing.<sup>4</sup> However, a close look at their major concerns shows that there are some similarities and not only differences between the two. In terms of similarities, they are both concerned with the development of healthy relationships. Although they begin in different "locations," they end up at the same place practically--they are concerned with the healing of hurts and alleviation of distress in human relationships and interactions. This marks their relevance for pastoral care and counseling, which is always concerned with healing, sustenance, and fulfillment of individuals, families, and communities.<sup>5</sup> By way of contrast, however, family systems theory focuses on relationships internal to the

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<sup>4</sup> For a feminist critique of family systems theory's neglect of gender dynamics and a detailed discussion of this topic see, for example, McGoldrick et al., eds., *Women in Families*; and Braverman, ed., *A Guide to Feminist Family Therapy*.

<sup>5</sup> Masamba, "Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling," 13.

family, whereas African women's theology addresses human relationships in their totality, i.e., in all spheres of life, including family, church, culture, politics, and economics (to name only a few). This contrast is directly related to contrasts between the disciplines of psychology and theology. Indeed, the transformation of persons and systems in which people live is one of the motives that drive these two systems of thought and practice. But African women's theology goes beyond the concern for right relationships by seeking the renewal of the human community and the whole of creation.

Another characteristic of African women's theology is its call for gender justice in all sorts of human relationships (household, family, marriage, church, sociopolitical arena, etc.). The theology of African women calls for the development of new values upon which to create and maintain healthy family relationships and community in which relationships of integrity and mutuality with others will emerge. Family systems theory, in its contextual form especially, is concerned with relational justice as well, although not necessarily gender justice. In fact, family systems theory generally seeks to foster a gender neutral attitude with its focus on relationship and emotional processes rather than the content of these processes or human problems. As I stated earlier, this is one of the limitations of family systems theory.<sup>6</sup> This limitation is overcome in our work through an inclusion and use of gender as an important category of analysis and pastoral strategies for responding to gender-based problems in human relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> For a critique of the absence of gender as a category of analysis and assessment in family systems theory, see Rachel T. Hare-Mustin, "The Problem of Gender in Family Therapy Theory; and " Virginia Goldner, "Generation and Gender: Normative and Covert Hierarchies," in *Women in Families*, ed. McGoldrick et al. Another feminist theorist, Harriet Goldhor Lerner, notes that one of the reasons why gender is neglected in family systems theory is because Bowen, one of the pioneers of family systems theory, sees feminist protest as emotionally reactive. As such, it may be viewed as a response based on aspects of one's non-differentiation. See Harriet Lerner, "Is Family Systems Theory Really Systemic? A Feminist Communication," in *A Guide to Feminist Family Therapy*, ed. Braverman, 52-56.

There is also a focus, in African women's theology, on making women's stories heard and known. Faced with the cultural norms that silence women, and the absence of women's voices in significant spheres of life, African women's theology is committed to giving voice to women's experiences by empowering women to tell their stories and speak on their own behalf, rather than having African men or women from other contexts speak for them. As stated earlier, family systems theory, in its initial formulation by male scholars, is largely unconcerned with gender as a category of analysis, nor is it committed to making women's stories heard and known as such. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, the overarching goal of family systems theory is to free persons from the limitations and restrictions of social context. Thus, it can be said that, in practice, this broad definition of the goal of family systems therapy focuses on alleviating symptoms by producing basic change in the interactional processes.<sup>7</sup> It is assumed, in family systems thinking, that change in interactional and communication patterns will lead to change in the presenting problem and its effects on family members. As such, family systems theory is concerned with making all family members' stories heard and known, with the hope that the balance of give and take among family members will be restored, thereby leading to the alleviation of distress and increased satisfaction. It can, therefore, be said that the ultimate goal of both African women's theology and family systems theory is liberation, healing, and wholeness.<sup>8</sup> Again, this points to the pastoral

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<sup>7</sup> See Froma Walsh and Michele Scheinkman, "(Fe)male: The Hidden Gender Dimension in Models of Family Therapy," in *Women in Families*, ed. McGoldrick et al., 21-23; here Walsh and Scheinkman critique family systems theories for being oblivious to gender issues in families, and especially to power differentials between men and women within the family. However, they note that this development in family systems theory is unfortunate, because among its pioneers (such as Jay Haley) there was recognition of the oppressed nature of the woman's position on a societal level, even though this has never been a major emphasis of family systems therapy.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the goals of African women's theology, see Oduyoye and Kanyoro, eds., *Will to Arise*; Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa," 26-34; Njoroge, "The Missing Voice," 77-83; Denise Ackermann,

theological relevance of these two schools of thought and practice. Pastoral care and counseling is deeply concerned with the liberation, healing, and wholeness of individuals, families, and communities. In its generalist mode, pastoral care seeks to nurture wholeness in people, and in its specialized form (i.e., pastoral counseling), it aims at restoring and repairing broken lives, including broken relationships and communities, in order to empower “individuals, groups of human beings and families to utilize the strength located in the core of their individual and group personality and culture” and thus lead meaningful lives.<sup>9</sup> Both African women’s theology and family systems theory can be viewed as rejecting norms, values, and practices that cause distress, constrict, inhibit, and oppress people.

Further, African feminist theology seeks to promote the individuality of women by constructing an inclusive anthropology that asserts the uniqueness, value, and humanity of both women and men. The promotion of women's individuality is done within the context of affirming relationality as a key description for an inclusive view of humanity.<sup>10</sup> Relationality is viewed as a desirable mode of being because it is the opposite of alienation, apathy, and exclusion. More specifically, relationality is viewed as the practice of love and justice between people. Family systems theory, like African women's theology, is also concerned with the promotion of people's individuality within the context of the family; but, as indicated above, it does not hold a gender-specific commitment in its conceptualization of what constitutes individuality. In fact, it does not discuss what constitutes individuality for women or men. The Bowenian concept of the

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**"Faith and Feminism: Women Doing Theology," in *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 194.**

<sup>9</sup> Masamba, "Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling," 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ackermann, "Faith and Feminism," 203.

differentiation of the self, for example, indicates family systems theory's concern with human individuality, but this is not conceived or explained in gender- specific terms. While African women's theology speaks about the practice of love and justice as some of the marks of the inclusive view of humanity it proposes, family systems theory lacks a positive language for love, attachment, and closeness. Words such as *fusion* and *enmeshment* point to family systems theory's biases against valuing "relatedness," "seeking love and approval," and "being-for others."<sup>11</sup> From a systemic perspective, these characteristics reflect a low level or degree of differentiation, and therefore, they are undesirable, according to Bowen theory. However, we need to note that "it is not a relationship orientation, but rather a fused, reactive emotional position, that is regarded as dysfunctional by Bowen."<sup>12</sup> For family systems theory, relationships and their interactional patterns are arenas in which people can either thrive or be stifled. African women theologians' interest in relationality as a viable mode of being for both men and women, and family systems' valuing of the importance of differentiating the self as a way of maintaining both distance and connectedness in families, point to their common commitment to promoting healthy transactions between people. They are both committed to the well-being of men and women that all will be able to function optimally in their relationships. This points to their pastoral theological significance. Joseph Ghunney has insisted that this commitment to helping people relate well with one another is the central task of pastoral counseling in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Masamba ma Mpolo, on his part, has noted that the centrality of interpersonal relationships in African contexts points to

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<sup>11</sup> See Walsh and Scheinkman, "(Fe)male: The Hidden Gender Dimension in Models of Family Therapy," 34. See also Michele Bograd, "Enmeshment, Fusion or Relatedness? A Conceptual Analysis," in *A Guide to Feminist Family Therapy*, ed. Braverman.

<sup>12</sup> Walsh and Scheinkman, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ghunney, "[Pastoral Counseling in] Ghana," 90.

the necessity for pastoral care and counseling to offer opportunities to communities for “education in redemptive relationships.”<sup>14</sup> By that Masamba means, when faced with sociocultural factors that affect interpersonal relationships negatively, there is a need to engage in the search for new human values that will generate relational dynamics that foster among people a love that is based on “acceptance and not performance.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of an individual who is misbehaving towards others, this search involves helping the individual to accept guilt for what he or she did, thus making public his or her “personal misbehavior and unexpressed feelings which were blocked in the relationship and to make society aware of that which the individual [wronged] was feeling.”<sup>16</sup> Masamba’s program of educating people in redemptive relationships has application to problems in gender relations. To help men and women *function and relate well* in their relationships, pastors and pastoral counselors need to coach them to relate and share their lives drawing from a love that is based on a foundation that transcends the cultural prescriptions and expectations based on oppressive gender roles. Men who dominate family relationships can be helped to relate to women, in all their diversity as wives, sisters, colleagues, bosses, acquaintances, etc., not on the basis of the performance of culturally-defined gender roles, but rather on the ground of their acceptance of women’s common dignity and identity shared in their friendship with the triune God who created them in God’s image—male and female.

In addition, to educate people in redemptive relationships, pastors and pastoral counselors will need to enable men who promote distorted images of themselves and of women, and practice gender injustice, to be cognizant of the costs of their oppressive

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<sup>14</sup> Masamba, “Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling,” 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



behaviors and attitudes to women, to themselves, and to the community. Indeed, this process of educating the individual (and community) is intended to help him (when it is a male) to see the damage caused by him, and to guide him to accept guilt for one's "personal misbehavior" (i.e., the practice of gender-oppressive values and norms). Further, the process involves helping the individual to come to a recognition of the sociocultural rootedness of certain gender-specific biases, and one's role in making choices that would give rise to life and avoiding choices that cause hurt and pain to women or marginalized others.

Masamba argues that this approach in which one is led to accept guilt and responsibility can become "a true weapon [for redeeming] both the individual and society from fear of destruction."<sup>17</sup> I agree with Masamba. Helping men who dominate family relationships and/or abuse women and children in their families to identify how their abusive behavior toward women and children causes emotional damage and psychic trauma will not only enable them to see the costs of their violent practices to women and children, but also to themselves and to society. Such awareness will, hopefully, deter them from relating and behaving in domineering and abusive ways, thus, leading to an avoidance of causing the damages that diminish others and themselves.

There is another aspect that needs to be addressed by pastors and pastoral counselors as well: the issue of "learned attitudes and values." African women theologians have decried how women have also participated in their own oppression by internalizing values and attitudes that diminish women's well-being. Thus, African women theologians work to help women who have internalized these sexist values, practices, beliefs, and patterns create new models, and/or call forth old models, that will inspire women to seek personal improvement and fulfillment in life. But African women theologians are very clear that for this to succeed, women and men must agree to work

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

together.<sup>18</sup> It involves two sides of the male-female relationship to make substantial and meaningful change in this area of human functioning. As feminist family therapist Harriet Lerner suggests, the differentiation and clarification of the self would be impossible tasks for women (or men for that matter) unless women (and men) collectively change and challenge the constricting and distorting roles, rules, and structures that block their ability to define self and shape culture.<sup>19</sup> Another feminist family therapist, Rachel T. Hare-Mustin, has argued that the differentiation and clarification of the self “are utopian tasks for women until the structure of the family and society changes.”<sup>20</sup> We can add that until the internalized attitudes and values are discarded in both women and men, and new images that truly reflect the personhood of women and men are embraced, the change that we are seeking and laboring for will not happen.

Moreover, African women's theology promotes sensitivity to the various dimensions of human oppression, including classism, racism, elitism, sexism, and an affirmation of the inviolability of the dignity of all people. This broad social consciousness seems to be missing in family systems theory. In most instances, family systems theory ignores the dysfunction of the sociocultural system, and therefore, fails to include the broader societal structure in its intervention strategies aimed at effecting change. This neglect of the sociocultural factors creates a number of unsystemic dichotomies—the dichotomies between the personal and the political, the private and the public, the family and culture, family systems theory and feminist theory. This limitation is overcome, in our work, as we embrace and emphasize the African feminist view and indeed the systemic view that all of reality is connected. The personal and the political,

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<sup>18</sup> Njoroge, “Missing Voice,” 82.

<sup>19</sup> Lerner, “Is Family Systems Theory Really Systemic,” 53.

<sup>20</sup> Hare-Mustin, “Problem of Gender in Family Therapy Theory,” 68.

as well as the private and the public, for example, are all aspects of the same reality. Family systems theory shares African women's contention that in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, women's concerns are human concerns.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, then, family systems theory would hold that an issue of concern to a member of a system (family) is also a systemic issue, although it does so without adequate consideration of sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that affect the emotional and psychospiritual health of family members and the family system.

Emmanuel Lartey's notion of social holism can be used to support African feminist theology's *broad social consciousness*, and family systems theory's view of the systemic effect of individual behavior and experience. Lartey defines social holism as "the interpenetration and mutual influence between the various components of life." He views this holism as at once intrapersonal, interpersonal, and corporate, in the African universe.<sup>22</sup> Since all of reality is related, and individual experience has systemic ramifications, it is important that African pastors and pastoral counselors help men, especially, to see how gender-based oppression of women deeply affects and reduces the vitality of their life together in community. This awareness, however, must be followed by change in behavior.

Another important element of African women's theology is an emphasis placed on the importance of listening to women's stories and experiences, as well as to those of men and children. The theology of African women seeks to promote the awareness that any theology that does not listen intently to women, men, and children in light of religious-cultural, social, economic, and political milieus in which people live lacks authenticity

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<sup>21</sup> For an expanded discussion on this see Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community," 68-76.

<sup>22</sup> Lartey, "Some Contextual Implications for Pastoral Counseling in Ghana," 41.

and relevance.<sup>23</sup> Family systems theory upholds the value of listening to all family members and to their experience in the family. Thus, it shares African feminist commitment to those who are afflicted by constricting relationship practices in the family and church. Listening is an important area of responsibility for pastoral care and counseling. Pastors and pastoral counselors need to be taught the value of listening for effective work with women, men, and children who seek care and counsel from the churches. Also of significant importance is to teach people in congregations and families why and how to listen effectively. When people truly begin to listen to each other, they will begin to see each other in a new light. The hurts, pain, and hopes of others will take on new meanings; and the possibilities of creating redemptive relationships will be enhanced. Listening holds the key to the practice of relational ethics and the maintenance of the balance of fairness in human relationships. Relational ethics requires that we listen to each other's basic interests and needs, and respond to one another with sensitivity and care. These notions are central to contextual systemic theory's view of optimal human functioning in relationships. Pastoral caregiving that is sensitive to the trauma caused by gender injustice needs to create an environment in which the perpetrators and victims are given the opportunity to face each other so the hurts and suffering undergone by the victims will be given a hearing, not only by the pastoral caregiver, but also, and especially, by the perpetrators.

Similar to the emphasis on listening is the emphasis on praxis and action in African feminist theology. This emphasis entails a commitment to life, justice, and freedom from oppression.<sup>24</sup> Theologian Teresa Hinga, for example, insists that African feminist theology is both "a protest against the forced silence, and also a wake-up call to

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<sup>23</sup> Njoroge, "Missing Voice," 79.

<sup>24</sup> Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation," 29.

African women to rise and fight against the forces of injustice that surround them.”<sup>25</sup> When stretched far enough, family systems theory can be viewed as also being committed to this agenda. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of family systems practitioners ignore society and concern themselves with interactions between the family and individual members, with varying degree of emphasis on the family as a whole, or on the individual member, or on the interaction between the two.<sup>26</sup> Thus, issues of social responsibility and gender inequalities among family members are all alien notions to much of family systems theory, in its earlier formulation.<sup>27</sup> African pastoral care and counseling can overcome these limitations of family systems theory by embracing Emmanuel Lartey’s notion of social holism. As stated above, all human experience is related. What happens in the private sphere affects the public arena, and vice versa. Pastors and pastoral counselors must, therefore, sharpen their sensitivity and awareness as to how all of life is connected, and the necessity for supporting the struggle for gender justice at many levels, including both the private and public areas of life. Lartey’s concept of social holism can be used pastorally to support African feminist theology’s concern for justice and freedom in all spheres of life, and to correct family systems’ neglect of the social context.

Further, it is important to note that both African women's theology and family systems theory are concerned with change. The theology of African women attempts to analyze systems of oppression in religion, culture, and society in order to advance a holistic vision for change in these arenas. Family systems theory, on the other hand,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>26</sup> See Arnon Bentovim, and Warren Kinston “Focal Family Therapy: Joining Systems Theory with Psychodynamic Understanding,” in Gurman and Kniskern, ed., *Handbook of Family Therapy*, 2: 288.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2; 286.

centers itself on inducing change in interactional patterns among family members. Together, both seek to instigate a new relationally-sensitive consciousness, i.e., a radically transformed perspective, reflected in the change in transactional, behavioral, and attitudinal patterns leading to the equalization of relationships and restoration of the give and take balance between all participants in family and social life. For African women's theology this means that "women and men together will be able to contribute to naming and shaping their realities in such a way that all people's humanity is affirmed in just, loving, liberating and healing praxis."<sup>28</sup> From a family systems' perspective, I see two possibilities. First, there is an assumption that change in one element necessarily brings about change in other parts and, ultimately, in the whole. When one person affirms his or her own individuality by engaging in the work of self-differentiation, the changes that happen within will naturally have an impact on the system as a whole.

Likewise, when the structure of the family or system is changed or transformed, the positions of members in that group are also altered accordingly.<sup>29</sup> So, we see here two ways to effect change in a system. The first one is through changing the individual, and the second one is through changing the structure or organization of the system itself. Although there are nuances in terms and/or some major differences in these schools of thought and practice, I still see some similarities between them, as far as change is concerned. They are both concerned with the transformation of persons, their relationships, and systems in which they interrelate. For African women's theology, the concern for individual and societal transformation is one of the top priorities of its endeavors. For family systems theory, changes in family interactions and/or within the person are the locus of family systems therapeutic work. Since the latter is interested

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<sup>28</sup> Ackermann, "Faith and Feminism," 199.

<sup>29</sup> This is specifically the view held by structural family theory by Minuchin and others. See Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy*, 2.

more in processes and the former in content of human interactions (i.e., gender issues), they both consider human relationships as being central to their agendas. True change, therefore, will manifest itself in the way people relate toward one another. Again, pastoral theology utilizes differences between the focus on content or processes in these two schools of thought, by directing its attention to both relational/social processes, and to the content of these. It combines both theology and social sciences in its formulation of pastoral care norms. Pastoral theology's theo-anthropological foundation makes it possible to discuss oppressive and gender-based values and the dynamics of gender relations, as well as the relational and social processes that maintain these oppressive gender norms in the family, church, and society. If we define pastoral theology as "an attempt to relate the meanings and requirements of faith to concrete human problems and situations," as J. R. Burck and Rodney J. Hunter do,<sup>30</sup> we can then see how the inclusion of both processes and content of gender relations can be engaged in theologically creative ways and, thus, address both the content and processes of human relationships. Pastoral caregiving informed by this perspective will seek to promote change in both processes of human relationships and in the gender dynamics that diminish the well-being of women.

Further, the consideration of both content and process in pastoral theology can enable pastors and pastoral counselors to be aware of the value of the content of their pastoral action (i.e., the pastoral effectiveness of what they say and do in pastoral situations) as well as to be able to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used in their pastoral practice (i.e., how they approach pastoral situations as well as how they make interventions) in their provision of care for gender relations. The perichoretic view of how the divine persons interrelate within God, which will be discussed below, provides a strong foundation on which to ground a theology of change that includes both

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<sup>30</sup> J. R. Burck and Rodney J. Hunter, "Protestant Pastoral Theology," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, gen. ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 868.

the African feminist focus on content of human relationships (i.e., gender relations) and family systems' emphasis on processes of these relationships. The relationship between the three persons of the Trinity is characterized by each person's receiving their identity from the other through the interpenetration of one another, or the sharing of their specific properties with each other. The process of their relationship shows dynamics of mutual recognition and affirmation, and the content of their relationship reveals the love that seals their mutual valuation. As I will demonstrate below, friendship with this triune God is a strong foundation for developing optimal human relationships in the family, in the life of the church, and for the practice of pastoral care and counseling that participates in the transformation of oppressive relationships into relationships that enhance and increase life.

A major contrast between African women's theology and family systems theory is found in the former's understanding that true change does not come by human agency alone. True change comes through openness to the work of the Spirit of God who is involved in the work of renewing and bringing about a new creation.<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Moltmann puts it very well when he says that "the new community of women and men sought in many churches today is a question of the experience of the Spirit."<sup>32</sup> Through his pneumatological concept of the church,<sup>33</sup> Moltmann contends that the Spirit, who is poured on *all* flesh, works both in the church and in culture to bring men and women into a "mutually fruitful relationship," as the Spirit works for the psycho-social and cultural liberation of men and women in the church and society. I see Moltmann's perspective as suggesting that men and women who have experienced the Spirit of life would show

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<sup>31</sup> Rom. 8: 17-18; Rev. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 239.

<sup>33</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1977).



signs of being liberated from gender arrangements that oppress and diminish them. This understanding of the work of the Spirit can be viewed, for our purpose, as conveying the idea that the Spirit of God, who makes possible and restores the image of God in human beings, intends to free women and men from overconformity to gender role requirements that, psychologically and theologically speaking, de-self them and distort the image of God within them. Through the activity of the Spirit, which is not constrained by human socialization processes like gender and sex-role socialization, women who have internalized self-abnegating attitudes and values can be freed from them, and they regain an awareness of their endowment and self-worth in the fellowship of the Spirit. Likewise, men who have internalized sexist norms and/or are under cultural pressure to conform to gender requirements that situate them in a position of privilege over against women can be freed from the compulsion to dominate. As Moltmann puts it,

[Men are] liberated from the dominating role which isolates them from life and alienates them from themselves, freed for their true humanity, their own charismata, and for a community with women on all levels in society and the church, a community which will further life.<sup>34</sup>

What this means is that women and men who have experienced the Spirit come to discover the image of God in each other as well as in the endowment they each possess. They experience healing and transformation as they participate in the fellowship of the Spirit of God. Such participation enables them to see that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is also “the antitype of the human communities which are built up on injustice and violence, for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit gives to each his or her own [sense of worth]. In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, people accept one another mutually, and reciprocally recognize each other’s dignity and rights.”<sup>35</sup> In this fellowship, which is

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<sup>34</sup> Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 241.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

participation in the divine community, people “give one another life, and come alive from another.”<sup>36</sup> African women theologians’ understanding of the spiritual life is in harmony with Moltmann’s view of life in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Their concern for mutuality, reciprocity, and dignity as emanating from a community that truly participates in the life of God is affirmed in the above description by Moltmann. As stated above, the transformation of relationships and the restoration of African communities along liberative and empowering lines are strongly predicated, in African women’s theology, on spiritual grounds, i.e., on the experience of the Spirit of life. The building of an empowering church and society that uphold and promote the full humanity of every individual stems from these spiritual foundations.<sup>37</sup> Thus, I reiterate again the importance for pastors and pastoral counselors, in African settings (and other places around the world), to seek participation in the work of the Spirit of God. Grounding our work in the movements and rhythms of the Spirit of God will not only help keep before us the transformative and renewing work the Spirit is doing, but also will help pastors and pastoral counselors to break loose from gender arrangements that hamper their work. Thus, spirituality is central to African women’s project for a better human community and world. In this sense, their understanding of change is faith-based. It builds on the faith resources of African women, their trust in God, and their experience of the saving power of Jesus Christ to empower them to build a new image of themselves and develop new

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>37</sup> For an extended discussion on this, see for example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 169.

patterns of relating and of life together.<sup>38</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, for example, talks about how African women are silenced by culture, but sustained by faith.<sup>39</sup> It is this faith and the accompanying hope that are the basis of African women's transformative work. Women and men are, therefore, called to actualize their faith and hope into action leading to transforming relationships and a transformed world. Women and men are invited to embody faith, hope, and love in their lives for there to be true change and transformation.

This call, which is essentially spiritual, does have a psychological element as well. Here used, family systems theory can advance African feminist theology's quest for a new African woman and a new humanity. For example, Oduyoye's injunction to African women "to dream" insists not only on women incarnating faith, hope, and love but also on affirming their womanhood and uniqueness as persons. In her poem "Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong," Oduyoye states:

**DREAM GIRL DREAM**  
 What's the future going to be?  
 Dream girl dream.  
 What we may become, that's what matters.  
 Dream woman dream.  
 Woman dream, Africa's dream.  
 Dream of the least of the world,  
 Permissible dreams.  
 Dream, for the other is you turned inside out.  
 Make the other strong and you will be strong,  
 We shall all be strong together.  
 Dream girl dream.

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<sup>38</sup> African women have come to understand the Scriptures as "challenging the image of the African woman known to the church and society only through her services." See Musimbi Kanyoro, "The Power to Name," in *The Power We Celebrate: Women's Stories of Faith and Power*, ed. Musimbi Kanyoro and Wendy S. Robins (Geneva: WCC Publishers, 1992), 24.

<sup>39</sup> Kanyoro, "Silenced by Culture, Sustained by Faith," 1-4.

Be a woman, and Africa will be strong.<sup>40</sup>

We can see here that the call to embody imaginative hope for a better community is also the call to claim and affirm one's individuality and dignity. The injunction to "be a woman" is a call to differentiate (in the Bowenian sense) and to assert one's role in the crafting of the new world where women's already active role in building a community in which "we shall be strong together," will be recognized, accepted, and valued by men. Here again, individuality is affirmed in community; or better still, community is affirmed for the sake of promoting individuality, and vice versa. But this is never a call to individualism or isolationism. African women theologians are well aware that these modes of being are deficient and, therefore, fall short of the likeness of God. I will discuss this line of thought later when I discuss the new kind of community toward which African women theologians are calling us. But what we can say about the call by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and other African women theologians to "be a woman"<sup>41</sup> clearly points to the fact that the search for individuality for African women theologians entails both a journey to personhood *and* connectedness in community. In other words, the call to differentiate does not swallow up the concern for the other, for "the other is you turned inside out." Therefore the concern for oneself is intricately tied to the concern for the other. By valuing oneself, and dreaming about what one may become, one also is dreaming about others who will naturally benefit from one's individuality. In this sense, there is no contradiction between individuality and community, because the latter cannot

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<sup>40</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong," in *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, ed. Letty Russell et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>41</sup> This theme is also expressed in Ada Nyaga, "Women's Dignity and Worth in God's Kingdom"; Margaret K. Obaga, "We are Members of God's Commonwealth"; Grace N. Ndyabahika, "Women's Place in Creation"; Jessica Keturah Nakawombe, "Women in the Kingdom of God," among others, in *Groaning in Faith*, eds. Kanyoro and Njoroge.

be without the former. Thus, "a person owes her community nothing less than her best, [and] she cannot give her best if she is not empowered to do so."<sup>42</sup> To this Oduyoye adds that "it is an unforgivable act to stop a person midstream simply on the basis of gender."<sup>43</sup>

A few observations specific to the practice of pastoral care and counseling can be made here. The above discussion shows the importance of providing pastoral support to women and men in the process of dreaming of "what's the future going to be." This support must involve the affirmation of women's and men's individuality and a commitment to the development of a community that supports and values it. Indeed, pastors and church leaders need to show unambiguously their commitment to the growth and development of women and men to provide opportunities in which people are encouraged to dream of what they become, and how these dreams may shape their relationships in the community. This commitment by pastors and other church leaders is a commitment to make others strong *as oneself*.<sup>44</sup> In "mak[ing] the other strong, you will be strong [and] we shall be strong together." Indeed, dreaming for a better world, and the struggle to translate hopes into actions for healing and wholeness are some of the core elements of African women's theology, and ones that African pastoral theology and care shares.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Oduyoye, "Be a Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong," 50.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>44</sup> My emphasis. I see Oduyoye as insisting that the African woman must affirm and accept her strength, and then encourage others (including men), to develop their own strength as well.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Emmanuel Larrey, Daisy Nwachuku, and Kasonga wa Kasonga, eds., *The Church and Healing: Echoes from Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994).

Oduyoye's poem reverberates with themes common to African women's theology and spirituality: resistance, liberation, mutuality, reciprocity, interdependence, relationality, transformation, a profound longing for human wholeness, and the desire for a better world. Underlying these themes is faith in the God of life who wills health, well-being, and wholeness for all (men, women, children), and the whole of creation. African feminist theology's quest for a new humanity and a new world is deeply grounded in the spirituality described above.

Oduyoye's call "to be a woman" and to be involved in making "the other" strong, as well as the hope that "we shall be strong together" reflect the belief in human beings' potential to change their world and themselves for the better. We see here African women theologians' belief in the contribution of human agency to the mending and renewing of God's creation.<sup>46</sup> It is never faith in the human capacity alone. It is involvement with the Spirit of God that is at work in God's creation.

Like African women's theology, family systems theory, especially in its contextual form, is also optimistic and resource-based. Contextual systemic theory is predicated on trust and the development of trustworthy relationships. It is based on resources rather than on deficits. It is concerned with calling forth the relational resources—including residual trust—and bringing them to bear on the reparative and mending work involved in restoring relationships to health. This perspective is especially important in informing pastoral caregiving in situations of gender conflicts. Although there are problems in gender relations in African families and the church, as pointed out by African women theologians, resources to repair these problems can also be found in these same contexts. Pastoral caregiving informed by this systemic perspective involves

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<sup>46</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 188-207; Oduyoye, "Be a Woman and Africa Will Be Strong," 35-53; Denise Ackermann, "A Voice was Heard in Ramah': A Feminist Theology of Praxis and Healing in South Africa," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 88; Kanyoro, "Silenced by Culture, Sustained by Faith."

the identification of the health-promoting relational resources and the calling forth of residual trust to bear upon the work of healing the trauma caused by gender injustice and the restoration of gender relations to health. Indeed, the combination of the systemic perspective, the African feminist outlook, and pastoral theology provides a firm foundation for the practice of pastoral care and counseling because it helps people find the resources for change both within themselves and within their own cultural contexts. We now turn to the discussion of African women's search for full humanity and a better community, and how these concerns can best be responded to pastorally by using the theological image of perichoresis.

#### **Perichoresis as a Theological Image for Gender-Sensitive Pastoral Care and Counseling**

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that perichoresis is an evocative theological image that can provide norms not only for optimal gender relations, but also for gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving in situations of gender conflicts and oppression. This perspective is based on the assumption that our image of God is the reflection of our central values and the way we live these out in practice. In this section, I will discuss how African women's search for anthropological integrity and their quest for a better human community and transformed gender relations, among other things, can be addressed pastorally by using the concept of perichoresis as a resource for gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving.

African women's theological project emphasizes the need to articulate a new anthropological vision that supports their theological efforts "to heal the brokenness between men and women."<sup>47</sup> For them, to be truly human involves mutuality and interdependence between males and females.<sup>48</sup> That is why they decry and challenge the

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<sup>47</sup> See Martey, *African Theology*, 74-6.

<sup>48</sup> Njoroge has contended that the African understanding of communal life entails "generosity, mutuality, reciprocity, caring and nurturing new relationships and righting wrongs as the foundations of African ethics." She insists that these values must be

existence of oppressive gender patterns between African women and men and call for the creation of new norms that would reestablish true community between women and men. The concerns in African women's theology to heal human brokenness between women and men and to restore true mutuality and interdependence between them, under God, reflect some of the central concerns of pastoral theology in general. Paul Pruyser, for example, suggests that

the subject of pastoral theology is *the person*, the concrete man, woman, or child and his *personal interactions*, not a disease, disorder, vice, deviation, or defect. Attuned as it is to *personal states of being* and *personal journeys of becoming*, modern pastoral theology requires in its practice a personalistic language that can capture experiences, events, outlooks, struggles, attitudes, feelings, hopes, and the values that men [and women] live by.<sup>49</sup>

Pruyser's description of the subject of pastoral theology is well-reflected in this work.

Throughout this dissertation there is a concern for how oppressive gender relations affect the *concrete* lives of women, men, and children. As stated above, Masamba ma Mpolo's passion for educating people in redemptive relationships, for instance, is aimed at addressing and correcting problems in people's personal interactions, so that people will be able to relate well in their relationships. Indeed, I see this pastoral role of educating people as involving the equipping of women, men, and children to build relationships out of which grace arises, i.e., relationships in which all are able to respond to one another in meaningful and enhancing ways. To accomplish this, pastors and pastoral caregivers and counselors will need to be attuned to people's personal states of being which, in this

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reappropriated in order to improve gender relations in the African setting. See Njoroge, "Groaning and Languishing in Labor Pains," in *Groaning in Faith*, ed. Kanyoro and Njoroge, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Pruyser, *The Minister as a Diagnostician: Personal Problems in Pastoral Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 132 (emphasis mine).



dissertation, means specifically getting attuned to how gender relations diminish or enhance women's, men's, and children's lives. The attunement to people's personal states of being requires taking seriously the experiences, struggles, feelings, and hopes shared by parishioners. Attunement is achieved by listening and conveying unambiguously a message of support, understanding and sustenance to those women, men, and children who are affected by gender injustice. Those who hold attitudes, perspectives, and values that diminish women's, men's, and children's well-being also need skilled pastoral attention that would call them to account for the damage they cause to others and to themselves, and to acts of repentance and commitment to change. The ultimate goal of pastoral caregiving here is to lead all people toward the healing of broken relationships and an affirmation of the necessity to restore mutuality and interdependence between women and men. As stated above, this is done by calling women, men, and children to participate in the life of the triune God who calls them to a life free of domination, subordination, and violence. The notion of perichoresis, African women's theology and family systems theory provide African pastors, pastoral caregivers, and counselors with a personalistic language that can help them assess, understand, and challenge the attitudes, behaviors, and values that hamper women's and men's personal journeys of becoming who and what God intends them to be—differentiated persons who find meaning and grace in the community of differentiated others, under God.

Earlier, I spoke of the centrality of the concept of relationality in describing humanity in African women's theological anthropology.<sup>50</sup> African women theologians have maintained that relationality provides an inclusive view of humanity. Viewing it as the opposite of alienation, apathy, and exclusion, they suggest that it best describes the vision of humanity they would like to see fully realized in African families and the church. With this understanding of the essential nature of human beings comes a definition of sin as anything that mars, distorts, or destroys relationality.<sup>51</sup> African women theologians hold that relationality is an essential description of our common humanity, because the notion of relationality itself has origins in the trinitarian understanding of who God is and how God relates within Godself and with God's creation. "God-in-relation with Godself extends relationality to all creation. We have a God who, from the beginning, sought to be in relation with created humanity."<sup>52</sup> This affirmation is intended therefore to invite both men and women to practice the belief that the humanity of all people is inviolable and needs to be nurtured. Further, because God is

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<sup>50</sup> This point is especially emphasized by Denise Ackermann, a white South African feminist theologian, in her previously quoted article "Faith and Feminism: Women Doing Theology," in *Doing Theology in Context*, ed. de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, 202-03. I have taken the liberty of using Ackermann's thought in this dissertation because she is a member of the "Circle of African Women Theologians," and sees her work as standing in the spirit of the work of African women theologians throughout Africa. Ackermann's articles have been published along with writings by Black African women from all over Africa (see, for example, Kanyoro and Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith*).

<sup>51</sup> Ackerman, "Faith and Feminism," 203.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

relational, our being in relation with our neighbor would necessarily induce a liberating praxis.<sup>53</sup>

I agree with African women theologians that relationality as a description of human nature has the potential for addressing issues of power imbalance, and domination between women and men. However, I am concerned that the understanding of relationality alone as a central description of humanity may overshadow the very individuality that African women theologians are advocating.<sup>54</sup> To affirm relationships this way would be similar to upholding the systemic notion of the “system” to the neglect of the “self.”<sup>55</sup> To avoid this problem, I would like to make a clear connection between the notion of relationality and that of the *Imago Dei* in order to develop a perspective that would clearly support the view of humanity toward which African women theologians are calling us toward. I will draw insights from some trinitarian theologians to develop my argument.

While some trinitarian theologians view the human person as “relation,” or “relatedness,” Miroslav Volf, for example, contends that the definition of a human person

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> I am aware that the emphasis on relationality as a central category in describing human nature is based on both Trinitarian thinking and on the theological notion of the *Imago Dei* present in all human beings. I will discuss later how both relationality and *Imago Dei* notions must be used together to convey the sense of humanity that African women's theology wants to foster.

<sup>55</sup> Family systems theory has been critiqued by theoreticians such as Nichols, *Self in the System*, for “finding the system/family” and “losing the self.” We hold in this work that family systems, at its best, considers the individual as sub-system of a system, and it values the individual's intrapsychic processes even as it values interpersonal and systemic dynamics. See the discussion, in Chapter 4, of contextual therapy's understanding of the relational context as constitutive of individual psychology, facts, relational ethics, and much more.

as "relation" or "relatedness" may lead to the loss of the individuality of persons in relationships, with the relationship gaining primacy over the individual.<sup>56</sup> Volf maintains that, basically, the trinitarian understanding of person as relatedness assumes the notions of "self-giving" and "the presence of the other in the self." He argues that a viable trinitarian perspective must affirm self-giving without losing the self; in addition, the presence of the other in the self must be affirmed "without slipping into inequality."<sup>57</sup> Volf goes on to suggest that Moltmann's trinitarian thought parallels his own, in that it "refuses to dissolve persons into relations and seeks to affirm their equality."<sup>58</sup> For Moltmann, the relationships of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are "relationships of fellowship and are open to the world."<sup>59</sup> In this fellowship, the divine persons are not self-enclosed individuals; rather, they are determined in their particular identity by other persons, and as such, are not reduced to relations. To think of person simply as relations "dissolves the Trinitarian concept of person and does away with the interpersonal concept of relation."<sup>60</sup> Following Moltmann, Volf proposes that to preserve both *person* and *relation* we must understand them in a reciprocal relationship. "There are no persons

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<sup>56</sup> Volf's work enters into dialogue with Trinitarian theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger, Jürgen Moltmann, and others.

<sup>57</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 179.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993), cited in Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 179.

<sup>60</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 180.

without relations, but there are no relations without persons.”<sup>61</sup> Volf adds, “persons are not relations; persons stand in relations that shape their identity.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, human personhood and relationality must be patterned after the Trinitarian understanding of God. In the doctrine of the Trinity, divine persons are not threatened by dissolution and inequality. Here the twin ideas of “the giving of the self to the other,” and “the presence of the other in the self,” point to the notion of a self that “can do the giving of itself and that can remain itself even after it has received the other.”<sup>63</sup> Volf writes:

The *self-giving* of the divine persons [does not entail] a dissolution of the self. . . . Instead, the *self-giving* is a way in which each divine person seeks the ‘glory’ of the other and makes space in itself for the others. The indwelling of the one divine person in the other [does not entail] colonization of the other. . . . Instead, the *indwelling* presupposes that the otherness of the other—the other’s identity—has been preserved, not self-enclosed and static “pure identity” but open and dynamic “identity-with-non-identity.”<sup>64</sup>

This idea of the divine *mutual indwelling* resulting from *self-giving* is reflected in the term perichoresis.<sup>65</sup> Perichoresis conveys the idea that divine persons have their being in each other without any coalescence or commingling.<sup>66</sup> Volf submits that the resources of

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<sup>61</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 172, cited in Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 180.

<sup>62</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 180.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.; emphasis in original.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 181; Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*; and Mante, “Towards an Ecological Christian Theology of Creation”; Mante suggests that perichoresis is the archetype of all relations, including relationship between human beings and the whole of creation.

<sup>66</sup> John of Damascus quoted in Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 181.

perichoresis are useful in our thinking about human identity.<sup>67</sup> I agree with Volf's argument. I propose that perichoresis can be a useful image in our thinking about the nature of human beings theologically and, as stated above, it can be a basis for gender-sensitive pastoral theological response to African women's search for anthropological integrity and their quest for a new community in which women's and men's individuality and communality (or relationality) are not in opposition, but rather inform and support each other.

As Volf, Joseph Mante, and African women suggest, the life of the Triune God should be normative for human relationships—including relationships between men and women.<sup>68</sup> The relations between the Trinitarian persons should serve as a model of "how the content of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' ought to be negotiated in the social process."<sup>69</sup> Because there are in God no one-sided relationships of superiority and subordination, command and obedience, or master and servant, the mutuality and reciprocity of love we find in the triune God must be reflected in human relations, including gender relations, among those who choose to live in the perichoretic community.<sup>70</sup> Here normativity is therefore located in the character of relations of divine persons, and it involves the procedures modeled on the life of the Triune God. Indeed, women and men will need to negotiate their mutual relations and their construction of

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<sup>67</sup> My former Claremont colleague Joseph Mante has also argued that perichoresis is a valuable worldview for life in contemporary Africa. See his unpublished paper based on his aforementioned dissertation, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," presented at the first Pan-African Conference, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, Calif., 1995.

<sup>68</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 181-89; Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," 17; Ackermann, "Faith and Feminism," 203.

<sup>69</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 181.

<sup>70</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 16-17.

gender identity, or any other understanding of their human identity, on the procedures found in the Trinity. As Volf puts it, "It is precisely the one triune God in whose image all human beings are created who holds the promise of peace between men and women with irreducible but changing gender identities."<sup>71</sup>

Here Volf, like African women theologians and family systems theory, affirms the value of self-giving and its contribution to the building of good relationships and the development of one's identity, with an understanding that one's identity is always internal to the "other." Such a trinitarian and systemic view of self-giving does not involve "the loss of the self," but rather presupposes the "affirmation of the self."<sup>72</sup> However, Volf, like African women theologians, recognizes the risk involved in the act of self-giving. When it is one-sided, there is limited potential for equalizing gender relationships. Both sides must be willing to give freely of themselves for there to be the balance needed in the relationship. Yet, Volf sets self-giving on a higher ground. He states:

But though self-giving has no assurance of success, it does have the promise of eternity because it reflects the character of the divine Trinity. It is on account of self-giving that divine persons exist in a *perfect community* in which each is itself only by being inhabited by the others. And it is through the power of self-giving that a new community of men and women will emerge, in which distinct but dynamic gender identities that are "not without" the other will be fashioned and re-fashioned in peace.<sup>73</sup>

African theologian Joseph Mante parallels Volf's perspective. Mante has specifically argued that a Trinitarian perichoretic view of the relationship within the triune God, and the God/world relationship, provides a viable world-view for life in Africa. Mante notes that while the term perichoresis was developed as early as the fifth century C.E. in Egypt and the other eastern churches, it has African roots which can be tapped in a special way

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<sup>71</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 182.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 189; emphasis is mine.

for the contemporary African understanding of life.<sup>74</sup> This principle of indwelling and interaction is a dynamic process which encompasses the whole of reality. Joseph Mante, following Moltmann, maintains that all relationships in the world which are analogous to God, including the relationship between woman and man, must reflect this trinitarian perichoresis of reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration.<sup>75</sup> A perichoretic view of the relationship between women and men should be set in the kingdom of unconditional love, where women and men are "freed to be true and complete human beings," with "all living things--each in its own specific ways--living in one another and with one another, from one another and for one another."<sup>76</sup> This statement expresses very well African women theologians' vision of life together, as well as a systemic perspective of healthy (or functional) relationships.

This understanding of perichoresis supports the African feminist theological view of the new community they strive to build. For one, it is in continuity with an African understanding of community, at its best, and it also reflects the best summation of African life and thought.<sup>77</sup> As Grace Ndyabahika suggests, "all things—living and non-

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<sup>74</sup> Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," 11; Mante notes, for example, that African scholar Swailem Sidhom has observed, although without using the word perichoresis itself, that the traditional African worldview is basically colored by a form of perichoresis. Sidhom is quoted as saying that "two basic principles seem to underlie all the complex relationships into which man [*sic*] enters, namely, the principle of indwelling and the principle of interaction." Thus, for Sidhom, "existence-in-relation sums up the pattern of the African way of life;" Swaile Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 169, cited in Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," 12.

<sup>75</sup> Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," 2.

<sup>76</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine of Creation," 15.



living—exist by giving and receiving from one another: thus is each individual and the whole of creation strengthened. It is necessary for men and women to realize our natural interdependence, to interact and to work together towards wholeness.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the African world-view is deeply communal. And this communality informs both the African concept of God and way of life.<sup>79</sup> Central to this communal way of being and living is the affirmation that “participation in a common life is the main if not only basis of all [African] family, social, political and religious institutions and customs.”<sup>80</sup>

However, there is a limitation in this world-view. Even though there is much emphasis and talk about fostering participation in a common life in African traditions, African women theologians have pointed out that there exist restrictive and exclusive elements that marginalize women. The theology of African women shows that the communal way of life, highly esteemed in most African settings, mostly works in favor of men. Despite a very strong emphasis on community and an affirmation of *participation vitale*, to use Mulago's term, African women theologians have revealed that

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<sup>78</sup> Ndyabahika, “Women’s Place in Creation,” 29.

<sup>79</sup> See for example A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's study of how the African communal way of life is thought to have influenced the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity through the African Father Tertullian; see Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994). Ogbonnaya's “communitarian divinity” provides insights into the Trinitarian nature of God that challenge the hierarchical and monarchical paradigms that one may say have influenced patriarchy in Christianity. His model of divinity, based on the best of African thought and life, provides a wonderful archetype for gender relationships and community life.

<sup>80</sup> Mulago gwa Cikala's research among the Bashi of Central Kivu in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi found out that *participation vitale* is central to life in family and society; see Mulago, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde* (The Bantu's traditional religion and their worldview) (Kinshasa, Congo: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1978). Placide Tempels' familiar book *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969) also insists that the notion of *participation vitale* informs the Bantu's way of life and ethics.

women are largely excluded from full participation in the common life. Thus, women maintain a very critical outlook on African culture, and caution against any *a priori* idealization of it.<sup>81</sup> As African male theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke has observed in his assessment of the twenty-first century agenda for African theologies, the theology of African women has taught us how to be truly African and yet critical of aspects of African culture without denigrating it. He contends that African women theologians have shown us that to criticize African culture does not necessarily lead to the vilification of it.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, I think that the African feminist critique of both African culture and African Christianity is an invitation to the church to explore and discover new possibilities of being church and being men and women of faith bound together by the good news of Jesus Christ who calls the whole of humanity to fullness of life.<sup>83</sup> I agree with Maluleke that the twenty-first century is going to produce "an even more gendered African

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<sup>81</sup> See for example Hinga, "Between Colonialism and Inculturation," 31; here Hinga shows that African women theologians use in their work a critical feminist hermeneutics of suspicion in their systematic evaluation of African culture in light of women's experience of sexism in church and society. Kanyoro has specifically insisted that African culture needs to be analyzed and assessed for what it is. So, in her insightful article, "Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Contribution," she suggests that African women must relate their critical study of African culture to scriptures and theology in order for them to be empowered with new courage and language to speak to new life-styles which reflect the justice of God for all people. In this article, and other writings, Kanyoro demands serious attention to the field of cultural hermeneutics. She strongly believes that there lies in this exploration potentials for discovering and appropriating new possibilities for being new women and men. In the same vein, Oduyoye states that "what women do in Africa is a critique of our own culture so that we may identify and utilize the values and voices that empower us and give us a sense of dignity and worth." She goes on to add that "this way, a life-giving hermeneutics is derived from the mixed bag of our culture. From the same bag, we can find resources against the demonization and scapegoating of women," and from the same bag we can find resources for women's liberation; see Oduyoye, "Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction," 167.

<sup>82</sup> Maluleke, "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies," 4-23.

<sup>83</sup> John 10: 10.

theology.”<sup>84</sup> Better yet, I believe that if we take seriously the vision that African women theologians have articulated, churches in Africa will be places where both women and men will find opportunities to grow and become fully human through their unhindered participation in the common life of faith and ministry. African women's unmasking of sexist practices in African societies, in the church, and in theology provides opportunities for women and men to embrace their common calling to the life of faith, hope, and love, and be full participants in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, we are faced with African women's critique of African culture and the church as male-dominated arenas in which women's experiences and voices are relegated to the margins. Clearly, Trinitarian relationships of fellowship in which self-giving is affirmed *without losing the self*, and the presence of the other in the self is affirmed *without slipping into inequality*, are missing in the African family and church. Rather, what we see, according to African feminist theological analysis, is women's sense of self being threatened by inequality and dissolution (to use Volf's terms).<sup>85</sup> Family systems theory would characterize African women's experiences as threatened by *fusion* and *enmeshment*, with their functional self being constantly threatened by the *forces of togetherness*. Here, it seems, women's differentiation of self is not promoted, and their sense of self is not protected from the constricting cultural practices and values.

This being the case, it will be important for African pastoral theology to uphold the African notion of *participation vitale*, by undergirding it with insights from African feminist theological analysis of gender relations, the systemic notions of the differentiation of the self, relational balance of fairness, and the distribution of power in

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<sup>84</sup> Maluleke, “Half a Century,” 22.

<sup>85</sup> For an extended discussion of African women's perspective on this topic see Oduyoye's examination of the value placed on “corporate personality” in African settings in *Daughters of Anowa*, 14-15. Ndyabahika has also noted how African women are afflicted by traditional cultural values which favor men over women and sons over daughters; see her article “Women's Place in Creation,” 27.

family processes, in order to create a worldview that affirms the perichoretic view of human relationships and community discussed above. This perichoretic perspective entails a view that affirms the value of self-giving (for building community), the affirmation of the self (especially that of women, and all those whose identity is threatened), participation in the common life, and the principle of existence-in-relation.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, I believe that embracing the theological notion of perichoresis is in itself a pastoral act. It is such because the consideration of perichoresis as a source of the knowledge of God and a basis for practicing the ministry of pastoral care entails a transformative act on the part of the pastors and pastoral counselors who, by virtue of participating in the community of the triune God, are enlisted in the divine work that continues to make all things new. Participation in the life of the triune God empowers pastors and pastoral counselors to lead women and men to struggle against cultural forces that threaten women's and men's sense of self and actively engage in activities that affirm the selfhood of women, men, and children. Some of the ways to accomplish this are through preaching, teaching, and designing liturgy (and worship experiences) that emphasize God's nature and modes of being, and their salvific import in our lives and our relationships. More specifically, pastoral care of women, men, and children, from this perspective, would emphasize the effect of the perichoretic community of the triune God and human beings on individuals and how human beings find their place in this divine community by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The African feminist theological belief and emphasis that both women and men are created in the likeness of God (*Imago Dei*), and the perichoretic view of gender relationships and community, together, do affirm the self-differentiation of both women and men as a mode of being to which God calls humanity as a whole. The dissolution of

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<sup>86</sup> As stated above, I agree with Mante that perichoresis is a valuable worldview for life, not only in the African context, but also the world over.

either man or woman into the image of the other, or into the image forced upon them by the family, community, or culture, is pastorally and theologically untenable. The differentiation of women and men is willed by God through the very divine act of creation. Femaleness and maleness are aspects of the communal life willed by God from the very foundations of life.<sup>87</sup> As Mante suggests, "the fact that in the creation account, God created both male and female is itself an indication that community is part of the 'essence' of humanness."<sup>88</sup> And I agree with Mante that the fact that the African is essentially communal is therefore a healthy sign of a living community. But, as I have pointed out above, Joseph Mante also notes that to stretch the African communal concept to the extent where the human being is only an image of the family (or community) is theologically problematic.<sup>89</sup> "Neither the man nor the woman are made in the image of each other," in the creation story. Rather, "the human being is made in the image of God."<sup>90</sup> Pastors and pastoral caregivers need to teach these things from the pulpit, in Sunday School classes, and in their work with women, men, and children, couples and families. This perspective on the relationship between men and women in relation to each other and to God is contributive to the kind of community and human identity toward which African women theologians are calling us. In this model both woman and man find their identity *directly* in relation to God. Each receives his or her dignity *directly* in relation to God. It is on the basis of this understanding, I believe, that African women theologians challenge women to unlearn what culture, religion, and tradition have inculcated in them, namely, that they are what they are expected to be by culture and

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<sup>87</sup> Gen. 1:27.

<sup>88</sup> Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine," 17.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

religion and that they should pattern their lives on these religio-cultural expectations and norms. African women theologians call women to find the link between the level of grace where women and men are considered equal before God and embrace a Christian anthropology which establishes the relationship between God and both women and men.<sup>91</sup> Thus, they urge women to examine critically "the damage suffered by internalizing oppressive images of ourselves,"<sup>92</sup> and therefore to begin "to assert themselves and help others to acquire an awareness of their dignity, in the Church as well as in society."<sup>93</sup> Nyaga's elaboration of the implications of this for women's lives is worth quoting at length. She writes:

Women need above all to develop a better image of themselves and of one another. It does not honour God if we deny or play down our God-given dignity and place in society. If we do not take hold of our destiny, that destiny will never really be ours and humanity as a whole will continue to be impoverished by our failure. Women therefore, should discover and remove obstacles--cultural or religious—and create new paths through the scriptures, which will enlighten them on how God wants them to live. Women need to work together and ask for solidarity within the Church to identify values and structures which stand in the way of the full realization of their worth in the service of God. Both men and women are held responsible before God for the quality of their human relationships and for the rest of creation. They have to work together, accepting the gifts and special calling of each, for the nurturing of each other.<sup>94</sup>

Expressed in this excerpt is what I would call an anthropology of social betterment and human uplift—an understanding of self and other as having the ability to work toward a new cultural and religious order for the improvement of human life. Nyaga, like her

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<sup>91</sup> See for example, Kanyoro, "Challenge of Feminist Theologies," 178.

<sup>92</sup> Ackermann, "Faith and Feminism," 208.

<sup>93</sup> Nyaga, "Women's Dignity and Worth in God's Kingdom," 82.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

female colleagues, is of the opinion that by affirming the human being as *Imago Dei*, African women will defy cultural and religious forces that seek to impose their imprints and claim on women to be made in the image of the culture or religion. Her call to women, in the above passage, to develop a better image of themselves, claim their dignity, seek their self-realization, engage in removing cultural and religious obstacles, create new paths, leading to the improvement of human relationships, among other things, clearly embodies the Bowenian concept of self-differentiation. Her invitation to women to achieve true dignity and worth echo Oduyoye's summons "to be a woman."<sup>95</sup>

The combination of insights from African women's theology, family systems theory, and the theological notion of perichoresis provides a strong basis for the practice of pastoral care and counseling capable of speaking to issues of oppressive gender norms and relations in African settings.

Perichoresis, as an evocative theological symbol, provides a transcendent relational order which becomes, in pastoral caregiving, a model for assessing and promoting optimal and adaptive patterns of relating across gender. Pastoral caregiving shaped by this notion provides new images of being human and new ways of relating and behaving. I see the goals of pastoral caregiving that is informed by the theological symbol of perichoresis, in conjunction with African women's theology and family systems theory, as involving, among other things, the affirmation of the God-given dignity and individuality of women, men, and children; nurturing that encourages self-differentiation and participation in optimal gender relationships; and, guiding that calls

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<sup>95</sup> Oduyoye, "Be A Woman, and Africa Will Be Strong," 35.

men to let go of distorted images of women and of themselves, and of behaviors that promote gender injustice.

Moreover, pastoral caregiving offered from this perspective is a means through which to call a new consciousness and a new community into existence. This involves the use of teaching, liturgy, and preaching that proclaim God not as the guarantor of male domination, but as the God who frees men and women for their true humanity and for a communal life in which they learn to live with one another, from one another, and for one another. Pastoral caregiving informed by the image of perichoresis insists that the church and society engage in the removal of cultural and religious obstacles that get in the way of developing optimal gender norms and relationships. It affirms human beings as *Imago Dei* and, therefore, engages in correcting and challenging religious and cultural forces that define women and men in restricting and oppressive images that do not reflect God's initial aim for humanity. This goal involves helping women and men unlearn oppressive images of maleness and femaleness that culture, religion, and tradition teach, and to embrace more encompassing images of humanity found in the notions of perichoresis and in other cultural sources.

Finally, pastoral caregiving based on the image of perichoresis, in conjunction with African women's theology and family systems theory, must challenge pastors and other pastoral caregivers to work vigorously for an integrated practice that attends both to the mending of broken relationships in families, the repairing of the wounded psyches of the psychologically afflicted, the empowerment of the afflicted to seek justice in the interest of wholeness, and for sociocultural reordering and systemic restructuring in order to undo oppressive gender arrangements.



### Concluding Remarks

From an African feminist, systemic, and trinitarian perspective, which this dissertation proposes, the concept of human community that emerges is one in which the *Imago Dei* in both women and men is unambiguously affirmed and nurtured; the uniqueness of both woman and man is stressed; the differentiation of woman and man is viewed as a mode of being willed by God, and to which we are all called; and self-giving is promoted as a way of building true community through the establishment of a balance of fairness in relationship exchanges, among other things. In this community, the individual person and the community are not in tension and opposition. Even as there is an affirmation of the individual, excessive individualism is never viewed as a viable mode of being, nor is the affirmation of community intended to promote an oppressive collectivism where the individual becomes dissolved. In this community, the person and community are not exclusive of each other. To quote Joseph Mante, "the person is not completely blurred into community, losing his/her personhood. Rather, person and community are two sides of one and the same life process, existing in perichoresis."<sup>96</sup> There is openness toward one another. The interactions and exchanges between people seek to correspond to the form of life within the triune God. There is no gender inequality; nor is there any colonization of woman by man, and vice versa. The mode of life in this new community reflects the full expression and flourishing of the *Imago Dei* in both women and men. Indeed, the notion of the *Imago Dei* in such a perichoretic

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<sup>96</sup> Mante, "Towards an African Ecological Doctrine," 19.

fellowship and community, properly speaking, becomes *Imago Trinitatis*.<sup>97</sup> This is the image of humanity that pastoral caregiving shaped by the theological notion of perichoresis, in conjunction with African women's theology and family systems theory, must promote. I will explore the implications of these notions of person, relationship, and community for the life of the church and for the practice of pastoral care and counseling in the following chapter.

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<sup>97</sup> I draw this idea from both Moltmann (*Spirit of Life*, 221); and Mante ("Towards an African Doctrine," 20).

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Utilizing the Resources in Pastoral Care and Counseling: General Implications and the Story of Aliviza**

#### **Introduction**

The notions of person, relationship, and community discussed in Chapter 5 have distinct implications for the life of the church and for the theory and practice of pastoral care and counseling, not only in African settings, but also in other places in the world. This chapter explores the implications of these notions, and others, based on the integrated consideration of African women's theology, family systems theory, and the theological image of perichoresis. This discussion is followed by a case study illustrating how to utilize the above resources in pastoral care and counseling of gender-based problems.

#### **Implications for the Life of the Church and the Communal Life**

The church that is based on the African feminist, systemic, and perichoretic perspective is a church that truly affirms the differentiation of the self in both theological and psychological terms as discussed in the preceding chapter. In an African feminist-systemic-perichoretic model of the church and family every member of the relational system is affirmed for who one is, and there is a recognition of what everyone brings to the life of the whole. The model of the church as the Body of Christ advocated by African women theologians exemplifies the African feminist-systemic-trinitarian perspective that I propose in this dissertation. The image of the church as the body of Christ has the potential for affirming the individuality and uniqueness of women, men, and children, because in this model every person is viewed as endowed with the Image of

God, through creation, and with spiritual gifts, through baptism.<sup>1</sup> Baptism is understood as a significant event in the life of the church. Through it both male and female are called to participate in the life of faith in all its dimensions. In the Body of Christ the Spirit is poured on the whole community,<sup>2</sup> and this Spirit gives special gifts to each member of the community for the common good.<sup>3</sup> As Paul puts it, the gifts are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."<sup>4</sup> Paul, therefore, contends that the purpose of the Christian calling to the one hope, one faith, and one baptism is growing up "in every way into . . . Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."<sup>5</sup> All members of the community, women and men, are

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<sup>1</sup> African women theologians root their theological reflections in God's gracious gifts of creation and baptism. Because women and men are made in the image of God, they are called by God into *right relationships* with each other, and with all creation. See, for example, Kanyoro, "Challenge," 176; Obaga, "We are Members of God's Commonwealth," in *Groaning in Faith*, ed. Kanyoro and Njoroge, 64-73, for a development of this argument.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2. This understanding of the church corresponds to Moltmann's pneumatological concept of the church discussed earlier in Chapter 5. In Moltmann's model of the church, men and women are each endowed with gifts by the same Spirit. For Moltmann, "to be a woman is a charismata, to be a man is a charismata, and the different charismata operate together for the rebirth of life." See Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 240.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4: 4-6, 11-16.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. 4: 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 4: 15-16.

called to maturity and growth. *Each member, being endowed with special gifts, is called and expected to function properly in order to promote the well-being of the whole body.*

It seems to me then that, in this model, if one member is *not functioning properly*, then the whole body is not completely well. Something is missing, and the church is not whole—thus, the cry of African women theologians for a more participatory and inclusive church and community in which all persons extend themselves to others, both men and women, and engage in the healing of relations among persons, thus creating true community.<sup>6</sup> All are part of the body of Christ and individually members of it.<sup>7</sup> And all (women and men) are called, through baptism, to participate in the *Missio Dei* in all its totality<sup>8</sup> because they all are made to drink of one Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Denise Ackermann has suggested that the model of the church as the Body of Christ illuminates aspects of the nature of the church which offer possibilities to those who experience alienation. Ackermann writes:

This image portrays the community of believers as being bonded together in union through the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit used in mutual ministry for the good of the whole body. As all baptized believers are recipients of at least one gift freely given by the Holy Spirit, and as there is no hierarchy of gifts, this model for church can lead to a non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical believing

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<sup>6</sup> See Nakawombe, "Women in the Kingdom of God," 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 12: 27.

<sup>8</sup> This theme is strongly asserted by most African women theologians. For a complete discussion, see the following articles, Kanyoro, "God Calls to Ministry: An Inclusive Hospitality"; Obaga, "We are Members of God's Commonwealth"; Nyaga, "Women's Dignity and Worth in God's Kingdom"; Nakawombe, "Women in the Kingdom of God"; Ndyabahika, "Women's Place in Creation," in *Groaning in Faith*, ed. Kanyoro and Njoroge.

<sup>9</sup> 1Cor. 12:13.

community. In the giving of gifts, the Spirit does not discriminate against women, the poor, the uneducated, the disabled, offering everyone an opportunity to play her or his role in the building up of the Body. Such an inclusive community of believers can be a powerful agent for social renewal.<sup>10</sup>

As we can see in this excerpt and the discussion preceding it, the model of the church as the Body of Christ stands in the best position to bring about the change toward which African women theologians are calling us. In this model, participation of every person is, in principle, ensured and expected at every level of the church and community life. We can say, certainly, that patriarchal societal structures and customs that have regulated gender relations in the church and society will lose ground, and a more participatory, perichoretic outlook will begin to emerge and exert its influence on all community members.

Further, differences (including gender difference) will be acknowledged as a source of creativity and vitality, rather than a source of tension and conflict. Indeed, baptism into the Body of Christ as discussed above is a call to "acts of judgment of ourselves and our institutions, which lead to repentance, change of mind and change of structure towards an inclusive communion of saints in the church of Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup> In the act of baptism, women and men are called to claim their dignity as children of God, and begin to work as partners with one another and with God in the *Missio Dei*.

I use systems thinking to support and illuminate the image of the church as the Body of Christ. From a systemic perspective, I can see in this model how constitutive elements of a system are interrelated and connected. When one element is afflicted, the whole system suffers. Likewise, when one element is enhanced, its enhancement increases the vitality of the whole system. The role of pastors and church leaders is to empower the body of Christ to gain vitality through the acknowledgement of the value of

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<sup>10</sup> Ackermann, "Faith and Feminism," 204.

<sup>11</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 182.

each member and how their gifts can strengthen their life together. Indeed, family systems theory, as an ecosystemic theory (that is, a theory that talks about the connectedness between organisms and their environments), makes us aware of the systemic nature of human existence and the ecological interconnectedness of human relationships and systems with one another and with physical systems, and so forth. From a systemic perspective, our connection or disconnection with others affects us whether we are aware of it or not. Disconnection or disengagement, when the relationship is not abusive, affects us negatively; it impoverishes us as we are cut-off from possible sources of personal and relational enrichment and meaning. Further, disconnection perpetuates unnecessary suffering and pain as people continue to foster maladaptive patterns of relating that define rigid rules that foster the suffering of those who set them, as well those who are excluded by them. Openness to change, grow, and connect sets us on the way toward healing human alienation and divisions. Better still, awareness of how one lives, and how one's values and practices affect another human person, may lead to the creation of a community that truly listens to all its members. As Denise Ackermann has suggested, "the longing for changes that will mend the world is born in awareness."<sup>12</sup> This awareness involves the willingness to listen to and hear women's experiences in the church, family, and society, and to take very seriously women's life stories and the changes for which they are calling. For men, this involves connecting with women's experience, and intentionally allowing that experience to speak to one's attitude, norms, values, and views about gender. One way to do this, for men, is to read literature written by African women or to attend a Conference or workshop led by African women on gender problems and women's experiences. As one learn about women's lives, one needs to ask oneself, "how do I promote negative images of women?" "How do I participate or contribute, through attitude and behavior, to social conditions

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<sup>12</sup> Ackermann, "A Voice was Heard in Ramah: A Feminist Theology of Praxis for Healing in South Africa," 90.

and attitudes which promote the oppression of women?" "What do I need to do to change my attitude and behavior?" In the act of truly listening to women, men will begin to experience transformation.

But for this to happen, pastors, pastoral counselors, and other church leaders need to be aware of how their commitment is essential in this regard. To enable true listening, and for an African feminist-systemic-perichoretic community to come to full realization, pastors, pastoral counselors, and church leaders need to have an understanding of their roles of leadership and caring as a participation in the work of the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit of God who is at work bestowing gifts to all members of the community, seeking full participation for all, healing wounds caused by unjust relationship practices, renewing lives, and transforming exclusive and male-dominated communities into arenas where equal regard, mutual valuation, and parity are practiced. This can only be accomplished through teaching, preaching, and other relationship strategies that promote the value of baptism as a practice through which all are claimed by the Spirit of God for service in the church. Therefore, the metaphor of baptism is one way of speaking about individuation, gender relations, and community. In baptism, normally, it is the individual who is the unit of baptism. People are baptized one at time. We do not baptize "family" or "marriage," but individual persons who might or might not be in family or marriage. Yet, they are baptized into the body of Christ, indeed, a new community of new individuals.

After saying all the preceding things, I see a question arising: Why should African men and women open themselves up to each other's experience? Or more precisely, why should African men open themselves up to the experiences and stories of African women? One way of answering this question is to say that, because African women are part of who African men are as members of the Body of Christ and as sharers in the same ecosystem, African men need to open themselves up to women's stories and experiences. From both this theological angle, and from a systemic perspective discussed above, we



cannot live authentically as members of the Body of Christ and participants in the common life without opening ourselves up to other fellow participants with us in our common humanity and calling. Yet, most humans choose to live inauthentically because of sin. Earlier I discussed how African women theologians define sin as anything that mars, distorts, or destroys relationality. Here, sin can also be viewed as anything that deters us from living authentically in our relationships. When we fail to see that the other gender, or any other person, whether I am aware of it or not, shares the same destiny with me, we are living in sin. However, when I, as an African male, open myself up to the experiences and stories of African women, my life is enriched and my experience enhanced. I am liberated from some aspects of my sin and am ready to live more authentically in my relationships with women, other men, and children. My awareness of women's suffering and pain caused by exclusive and inhibiting practices, remind me of my own experience of exclusion and marginalization in other dimensions of life as an African, black man living at this time and moment in a racist society. Women's experiences of being silenced remind me of my own experience of being relegated to the margins, and not given a voice, even when I know that I have something valuable to say for the common good. Shielding myself from African women's experiences and stories would not have yielded the same experience. My awareness of how my experience and destiny are intricately tied with that of African women and, indeed, with that of all those who are marginalized in any way would not have been possible. Studying the stories and experiences of African women has been truly an act of (pastoral) care for myself, and I propose that it can be for other men and women. Studying African women's theology and writing this dissertation has deepened my awareness of my connectedness with many marginalized and excluded others. I am not alone. I am in a community of women and men who share not only my experience of marginalization and suffering, but also people who share my struggles, my faith, and hope for a better world. Perhaps, a starting place for overcoming the resistance to change and listen is awareness of one's own experience

of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. It gives me great hope to stand in solidarity with people who are struggling against destructive forces with courage and faith, sustained by a vision of healing and reconciliation.<sup>13</sup>

I feel deeply blessed by African women's theology, and my understanding of the nature of pastoral care, and ministry in general, has been brought to new insights. I will discuss shortly what I see as the implications of the African feminist discussion of the nature of the church and human community for the practice of pastoral care. But first, let me go back to the question I have been addressing: Why and how should African men open themselves up to the experiences of African women? Another reason why I, as an African man, need to connect with the experiences and stories of African women, is that I am created to reflect, as I stated earlier, the image of the Triune God. Being *Imago Dei*, I am indeed *Imago Trinitatis*. In the perichoretic model of understanding the relations between the three persons of the Trinity discussed earlier, each divine person is not that person only, but "includes the other divine persons in itself; it is what it is only through the indwelling of the other. The Son is the Son because the Father and the Spirit indwell him; without this interiority of the Father and the Spirit, there would be no Son. Every divine person *is* the other persons, but he is the other persons in his own particular way."<sup>14</sup> I noted earlier in Chapter 5 how human beings as *Imago Trinitatis* condition and are conditioned by the characteristics of other persons in their social relations,<sup>15</sup> and how perichoresis was a valuable worldview for life not only in contemporary Africa, but also in other parts of the world. As *Imago Trinitatis*, and participants in the systemic

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<sup>13</sup> Rev. 7 and 21.

<sup>14</sup> Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of Ethnic Cleansing," unpublished paper, 1993, 22.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of Ethnic Cleansing," 22, for this line of thought.

worldview (or *vision du monde*), we cannot maintain attitudes of alienation across gender lines (or any other category of difference such as race, ethnicity, and culture in a multicultural context) and still live our essential nature as human beings. We need to overcome our limited perspectives on gender relations, and our blindness to the negative effects of the gender ideology on the life of girls and women, indeed, of boys and men as well. We need to resist all attempts to maintain the forces of patriarchy that seek to keep the system of exclusion and male domination in place. It will only continue to impoverish the life of the church and our life together in the African family and society. We need to be open to the Spirit of God who "issues from the essential inward community of the triune God, in all the richness of its relationships," and allow ourselves to be lured into fellowship with the triune God and open ourselves up for one another, as men and women, and for the whole creation of God.<sup>16</sup> This is one of the tasks of pastoral care and counseling: to help people open themselves up for one another for the building of healthy relationships and communities in which women, men, and children live authentic lives. Indeed, the Spirit liberates both men and women for life in the community. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye has aptly put it, "whatever is keeping subordination of women in the church cannot be the Spirit of God."<sup>17</sup>

#### **Implications for the Practice of Pastoral Care and Counseling**

God did not establish the earth and all creation in chaos, but in order and harmony. All things--living and non-living--exist by giving and receiving from one another: thus is each individual and the whole of creation strengthened. It is necessary for men and women to realize our natural interdependence, to interact and to work together towards this wholeness.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 219; Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of 'Ethnic Cleansing,'" 23.

<sup>17</sup> Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Ndyabahika, "Women's Place in Creation," 29.

The need for participation and wholeness is strongly expressed in African women's theology. This quest for a more participatory human community points to the reality of brokenness in human relationships. The need for healing, change, and empowerment of all to participate more fully in the common good life points to the need for adequate pastoral care and counseling. African women's theology and family systems theory embody great implications for pastoral care and counseling in African contexts. Pastoral care that is in dialogue with these two schools of thought and practice has the potential for healing human brokenness, facilitating change and transformation, and contributing to the realization of the African feminist vision of relational humanness and the common life.

In our discussion of the implications of African women's theology and family systems theory for pastoral care, important questions to ask are, "How can the practice of pastoral care be shaped and structured to respond to problems in gender relations in African families and churches?" How can pastoral care, understood as "the divinely-given mutuality of care shared across laity and clergy,"<sup>19</sup> respond adequately to African women's concerns and the emerging social changes prompted by this "new" gender consciousness? How can the new vision of gender relations, a new humanity, and a new community change the way we practice pastoral care? To focus these questions further, we can ask, "how can pastoral theology and care contribute to the conceptualization and implementation of the new vision of "right relationships" between women and men, and between human beings and God? Some of these questions are already addressed above. I am suggesting in this chapter that for pastoral theology to provide norms that would guide adequately the practice of pastoral care and counseling in situations of gender oppression, it needs to embrace the theological concept of perichoresis as a resource to

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<sup>19</sup> Pamela Couture, "Feminist, Wesleyan, Practical Theology and the Practice of Pastoral Care," in *Liberating Faith Practices*, ed. Denise M. Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters), 27.

guide our vision for healed relations across gender, a new humanity, and a new community.

Perichoresis, as an image for gender-sensitive pastoral caregiving, provides us with insights that can enable pastoral theology to relate more adequately the meanings and requirements of faith to problems in gender relations raised by African women theologians, and thus contribute to the transformation of male-dominated relationships, the affirmation of women's individuality, the socialization of boys and girls to respect each other, embrace their uniqueness, affirm their commonality, and celebrate their difference as a gift of the Spirit of God who wills them to differentiate.

Differentiation, as a quest for a new way to be human, has significant implications for the pastoral care not only of women and girls, but also of men and boys as they will naturally be dealing with the impact of the women's movement for personal and social change. Indeed, the changes sought by African women theologians will affect the life of men and boys, calling them to change. Naturally some men will find it difficult to adjust to the "new" gender and family configurations in which they do not hold traditional roles of privilege and authority. In the North American context, for example, we have all sorts of men's movements developing, in response to the challenge of the many women's movements that seek to change norms, values, and practices that affect women's lives negatively. Some of these movements are concerned with re-establishing men as leaders and heads of their families.<sup>20</sup> I suspect that the same thing may happen in African contexts as women's movements are increasing their influence on both women and men. To prevent such possibilities for defensive responses from developing, the church must be very intentional about designing aggressive educational programs and preventative

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of some womanist concerns about men's groups such as Promise Keepers and African American men's groups in the United States, see for example Toinette Eugene, "The Shaman Says. . . Womanist Reflection on Pastoral Care of African American Men," in *The Care of Men*, ed. Christie Cozad Neuger and James Newton Poling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 122-37.

care offered to help both women and men to embrace adaptively the new changes. The vision of African women theologians about community and individuality must be taken seriously by pastors and religious leaders in such a way that they will be informed, guided, and inspired by this vision as they do the work of ministry, and provide leadership, care, and counseling to women and men. As Toinette M. Eugene, writing from a North American context, observes, to care adequately for African American men, womanist issues and perspectives must be taken into account. She notes:

The competent pastoral care of black men in American culture and society requires *the commentary and cooperation of black women* if any lasting therapeutic, theological, and praxiological outcome is *to transform life in communities* in which black men and women lead, live, and fare.<sup>21</sup>

These insights have application in Africa as well. Listening to African women's challenges by incorporating their suggestions and calls for change into the church's pastoral practice would be of tremendous help in the shaping of the "new community" that the church is being called to build--a community in which both men and women will have their rightful place. The care of African men must specifically include African women's commentary on men's domination of family relations and church life. The dominant position of men in those arenas must be brought to the attention of men, asking them to concretely identify how they participate in the creation of gender subordination and marginalization of women, and helping them to see that male domination of family and social relations diminish not only women, but also impoverish boys and men and their relationships with women. Indeed, it impoverishes life in communities in which African men and African women "lead, live, and fare," to use Eugene's phrase.

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene, "Shaman Says," 122; emphasis is mine.

As pointed out in Chapters 2 and 3, the theology of African women expresses a deep concern for the restoration and/or development of *right relationships* between men and women within the family, the church, and the larger society. This concern challenges pastoral theology and care, I believe, to imagine and envision ways to equip, enable, and empower both men and women to develop *right relationships* in which all that diminishes another person will be discarded. African pastoral theology can meet this challenge by grounding itself in the perichoretic understanding of God, and by embracing and promoting the practical applications of such an understanding in the relationship between women and men, indeed, in all human relationships. Pastoral theology that is perichoretic in orientation participates in the ushering in of a new creation in which the glory of God, which is humanity that is fully alive, will flourish and fill the earth because it will engage in the dismantling of norms and practices that diminish life.

Since I have already discussed how pastoral theology can contribute to the conceptualization and implementation of the new vision of right relationships between women and men, the above questions, therefore, require that we speak briefly about the nature of pastoral care.

Pastoral care is understood as referring to "the solicitous concern expressed within the religious community for persons as they move through the life cycle and experience trouble, estrangement, distress, or spiritual thirst for meaning and connectedness centered in the faith community."<sup>22</sup> One of the strengths of this understanding of pastoral care is

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<sup>22</sup> L.O. Mills, "Pastoral Care (Histories, Traditions, and Definitions), in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, gen. ed. Hunter, 836; and William Clements, lecture notes for the introductory course to "Pastoral Care and Counseling," Claremont School of Theology, 1995.

its concern with spiritual thirst for meaning and connectedness; these foci show its relevance for this dissertation's interest in issues of gender conflicts between women and men and how the search for meaning and connectedness may help us to mend the breach and to renew and reestablish community.

The central concern of pastoral care is to nurture wholeness in people.<sup>23</sup> Where there is alienation and apathy, pastoral care seeks to make more justice by engaging in the repair of broken relationships, and reconciling divided communities, hence restoring individuals, families, and communities to wholeness. This project of pastoral care is clearly reflected in the above quote by Grace Ndyabahika. Pastoral care, through the lenses of Ndyabahika's concerns, would involve helping women, men, and children to know that they are interconnected. They can live meaningfully and, indeed, *faithfully* only when they come to realize their "natural interdependence," and that such realization calls them to "exist by giving and receiving from one another" (which can be interpreted as meaning to exist by valuing and affirming the uniqueness of each other), thus giving and receiving life from each other through their commitment to faithful living. Indeed, wholeness is achieved when the image of God is more apparent in African women, men, and children. In this sense, then, the primary goal of pastoral care and counseling is to help people come to a fuller realization of the image of God in their concrete situations and to enable them to bring this realization to all of their relationships in life.<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>23</sup> See Masamba, "Perspectives on African Pastoral Counseling," 15; Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> This includes the achievement of individuality through self-differentiation, etc.



understanding of pastoral care requires that pastors and pastoral counselors be equipped to labor for the fulfillment of the image of God in women, men, and children. If we hold on to the image of the church as the Body of Christ whose life is enabled by the Holy Spirit who bestows gifts to all the baptized, practitioners of pastoral care and counseling (i.e., pastors, pastoral counselors, and other pastoral caregivers) can also be viewed as being equipped and commissioned to do their ministry by the same Spirit of God who orders and empowers the life of the church. In this sense, pastoral care and counseling can be understood as an activity which "aims at the general increase of life and liveliness" among God's people.<sup>25</sup> T.W. Jennings specifically suggests that we view Spirit-led pastoral care and counseling as "that activity authorized and empowered by the Holy Spirit, which seeks to liberate persons from binding forces of grief, guilt, and other expressions of intrapsychic and interpersonal brokenness, so as to enable them to live more abundantly, generously, or fully."<sup>26</sup>

This understanding of pastoral care and counseling has relevance for addressing gender issues discussed in this dissertation. Sexism is a form of intrapsychic and interpersonal brokenness that needs healing and a form of life from which people need to be liberated. With regard to men who have appropriated sexist cultural norms and practices, pastoral work authorized by the Holy Spirit would seek to release them from the power of intrapsychic, interpersonal, and sociocultural brokenness and bondage that not only cause pain and suffering to women and girls but also diminish the humanity of

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<sup>25</sup> T.W. Jennings, "Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Pastoral Care," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, gen. ed. Hunter, 525.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

men and distort the image of God within them. Because it aims at the general increase of life and liveliness, pastoral care and counseling that is based upon the work of the Holy Spirit would challenge and denounce sexism unambiguously. As a spirited and spiriting praxis that aims at the "increase of the fruits of the Spirit," pastoral care and counseling would affirm the value of the differentiation of women, men, and children as essential to the life of the church. The notion of the differentiation of self, from this angle of vision, would then presuppose the cherishing of differences which, in turn, would entail growth and development in one's own unique way, following one's own developmental path or trajectory.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that self-differentiation that is enabled by Spirit-led pastoral care is not an end in itself. For such individually-focused self-differentiation would lead to isolation and apathy. Indeed, Spirit-led self-differentiation (self-differentiation that is enabled by Spirit-led pastoral care and counseling) is a means to a healthy sense of self and to healthy relationships and community. Self-differentiation is never an end in itself or it truncates growth of the overall system, and there is diminishment rather than an increase of life. This means, then, that psychological integration *alone* is never the ultimate goal of pastoral care and counseling.

Psychospiritual wholeness, through which the individual is enabled to recognize and embrace his or her "natural interdependence" with others, and his or her need to be in relationships of giving and receiving from one another is the mark and goal of Spirit-led

pastoral care and counseling.<sup>27</sup> When this is the case, wholeness is achieved, the image of God is fully apparent, and gender relations in church and family reflect the "increase of the fruits of the Spirit" at work in women, men, and children.

There is more to an understanding of pastoral care and counseling that is based upon the work of the Holy Spirit. T.W. Jennings suggests that pastoral care is not only "a wise and discerning listening, but also an appropriate, truthful, and liberating speech." Jennings adds that "the capacity to speak in ways which loosen the bonds of brokenness and invite the other into new and richer life is a further way in which pastoral care is a gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>28</sup> The understanding of pastoral care as *truthful* and *liberating speech* is highly relevant to the African situation addressed by this study. African women's theology has revealed the conspicuous and pervasive nature of problems in gender relations in different geographical and social contexts in Africa. The ubiquity of these issues in various locations represented by the African women discussed points to the *truthfulness* of their concerns and work. Indeed, it points to the necessity for African pastoral theology, care, and counseling to conceptualize and implement strategies that would correct gender injustice, enable and empower gender-sensitive patterns of relating, and challenge the trivialization and denial of the rootedness of sexism in certain cultural values and practices. Pastors and pastoral counselors need to communicate clearly and openly the truth about gender injustice so that women, men, and children will become

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<sup>27</sup> Scottish psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn has called this "mature dependence"; see his *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, with a new introduction by David E. Scharff and Ellinor Fairbairn Birtles (London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Jennings, "Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Pastoral Care," in Hunter, gen. ed., 526.

aware of the problems in the way they are socialized to image themselves and those of the other sex. I believe that it is the telling of the truth that will set people free from sexist values and practices that mar, distort, and negate the image of God present in all of us. African pastoral care as liberating speech can "loosen the bonds" of sociocultural prescriptions and expectations, and invite women, men, and children into "new and richer life" through friendship with the triune God. Indeed, through friendship with the triune God, women, men, and children will be able to enter a perichoretic community in which there is no domination or subordination of one by the other. Pastors and pastoral counselors will need, therefore, to develop listening and intervention skills that gear people in the direction of change; they also would need to develop speaking that would sharpen their *capacity to speak a liberating word*. At this juncture, there is no distinction between pastoral care and counseling and preaching. They are all part of one and the same healing dynamic. The pervasiveness and ubiquity of problems in gender relations require that pastors and pastoral counselors speak about these issues from the pulpit to persuade and enlist people to join in the struggle to: dismantle sociocultural and relationship structures that foster the domination of women and girls by men and boys in families, churches, and society; support, encourage, and nurture those women and men who are laboring to bring about transformation in gender relations; and, assure those who are discouraged, for lack of any apparent change, to renew their strength and regain trust in human beings' capacity for change. When pastors and pastoral counselors speak a *truthful and liberating speech*, their pastoral work will certainly foster "forms of life which do not merely conform to the norm of a broken and despirited world, but which

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exhibit traces of transcendent Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> It is the Spirit of God who truly nurtures wholeness in people; heals intrapsychic brokenness; repairs broken relationships; and reconciles divided communities. Pastoral care participates in the work of the Spirit of God, who is the true healer. Our discussion of the nature of pastoral care will be incomplete without a consideration of the functions of pastoral care. We now turn to this in the following paragraphs.

Traditional functions of pastoral care have included *healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling*,<sup>30</sup> to which Howard Clinebell has added the category of *nurturing*,<sup>31</sup> and Emmanuel Lartey has added the categories of liberating and empowering.<sup>32</sup> William Clements’ suggested category of “the prophetic dimension” in pastoral care can be seen as characterizing the two categories suggested by Lartey. Underlying these functions of pastoral care is the acknowledgment of the brokenness and alienation that characterize the human condition--human brokenness and alienation from one another and from God. Pastoral care has, therefore, historically sought not only to cure the soul but also to address the human situation of brokenness and alienation in its various manifestations in personal and interpersonal contexts.<sup>33</sup> More specifically, the pastoral care function of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> Clinebell, *Basic Types*.

<sup>32</sup> Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 33-42.

<sup>33</sup> John T. McNeil, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3.

reconciling has been particularly concerned with acts that call back the estranged, by seeking to reestablish broken relationships both vertically and horizontally.<sup>34</sup> I see this pastoral care function, among others, as having the potential for speaking to the issues in gender relations raised by African women theologians. The pastoral care function of reconciling can play a greater role in mending broken relationships between women and men by healing the brokenness, bridging the alienated, and restoring community. But, for this result to be truly achieved, the pastoral care function of reconciling must be reconceived and supplemented by “the prophetic dimension”<sup>35</sup> to church ministry and to pastoral care suggested, respectively, by African women theologians and Professor William Clements, among others. This prophetic dimension, taking its form and shape from African women's theology, systemic sensitivity and awareness, and the theological notion of perichoresis discussed above will enable African pastoral caregivers to be involved both in the healing and sustenance of people and the church, as well as a transformative praxis through which women and men will claim their true selves and embrace more fully their nature as *Imago Dei* and *Imago Trinitatis*, leading to full participation in the *Missio Dei*. Pastoral care that receives its rhythms from African women's theology, and its categories of analysis, assessment, and interventions from family systems theory, will be more proactive than reactionary.<sup>36</sup> By being more

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<sup>34</sup> Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> I see the prophetic dimension to ministry as reflected in the perichoretic worldview I am proposing in this dissertation.

<sup>36</sup> Most pastoral care today tends to be crisis-oriented because pastors are overworked and pastoral staffing is too minimal. Thus, they tend to focus on crises such as developmental changes and life transition issues. Most pastors and caregivers seem to

proactive,<sup>37</sup> rather than reactionary, African pastors and church leaders will be able to design pastoral strategies that will lead to the desired change of the critiqued sociocultural structures that afflict women (and men), and be very clear about how our strategies may lead to the transformation of individuals, families, and churches as arenas through which the values of justice, freedom, and love are reflected. Indeed, pastoral care cannot accomplish this if it is only reactionary and crisis-oriented. To make a difference, it must be proactive in providing a new orientation and direction that reduces the occurrence of unnecessary suffering.

In his critique of the reactionary mode of pastoral care, Professor William Clements has noted that while pastors and pastoral caregivers need pastoral skills to respond to crises, they need to have a way of getting above the day to day necessities in pastoral ministry and be able to survey the 'whole scene.' Professor Clements suggests that "[instead] of being an emergency ambulance driver who might sit in the station and wait for the next call, [pastors and pastoral caregivers] might think of themselves as the

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be waiting for a crisis in people's lives to respond. The issues raised by African women's theology require a different approach if any lasting change is going to occur. There are many hurts and wounds that have not healed with crisis-oriented interventions. While I recognize that pastoral care must continue to assist people in times of life crises such as developmental changes and transitions in life, illness, death, and suffering, it is also important to pay attention to how some kinds of suffering can be prevented by being very proactive in our pastoral strategies and interventions. For example, paying attention to how culture, religious tradition, family, and society shape individuals for good or for ill will help us alleviate unnecessary suffering by designing pastoral strategies that call for change and renewal in human relationships. Dealing with issues of gender relations, for example, from this angle could yield significant results in the lessening of suffering caused by unjust cultural and religious norms and practices.

<sup>37</sup> See for example the proactive stance and attitude of a structural therapist discussed in Chapter 4. I think the role of a structural family therapist as described in this dissertation does provide good insights as to how pastors and church leaders can be actively involved in their ministry in the church.

public health nurse whose job is to create and implement a plan of healthy prevention,"<sup>38</sup> thus rendering their pastoral care less reactive and more proactive.

If we apply this metaphor of the reactive ambulance driver and the proactive public nurse to the realities of human alienation and fragmented gender relationships in African families, churches, and society, the pastoral task must take *the prophetic dimension* as its *central modus operandi*. Here, African prophetic pastoral care must become a means of calling a new consciousness and a new community into existence.<sup>39</sup> Given the issues surrounding gender dynamics in African families and churches, the primary task for African pastors and pastoral leaders must be one of inviting people to embrace the new gender consciousness (by designing active educational programs in the church) and modeling in their own persons the attitudes of openness and acceptance of the equality between women and men, with an understanding that such openness reflects the values of the community modeled after relationship patterns found within the triune God. Because of its proactive stance, African prophetic pastoral care will be concerned with asserting and affirming the giftedness and uniqueness, the dignity and integrity, as well as the equality between women and men, and with calling people to embody this consciousness through concrete practices in the family and the church.

Further, prophetic pastoral care, informed by African women's theology, will include both private interventions and public actions in its programs of service. In his

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<sup>38</sup> William Clements, lecture notes, Claremont School of Theology, 1997.

<sup>39</sup> I am indebted to Clements for this line of thought from the aforementioned mentioned lecture.



discussion of the contribution of liberation theology to pastoral care, African pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey has noted the development of two 'new' models of pastoral care: namely, pastoral care as social action, and pastoral care as empowerment.<sup>40</sup> The model of pastoral care as social action is concerned with issues of injustice, domination, subordination, and discrimination. Based on a socio-economic and political analysis of a specific context, this model's aim is the transformation of societies and persons for the establishment of "a more socially just and equitable distribution of the human and material resources found on earth."<sup>41</sup> The pastoral task, from this perspective, involves denouncing the structures of injustices and oppression and engaging in the struggle for liberation by speaking on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed, doing advocacy work, and the like. As Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff put it, pastoral liberation theology is "the theology that sheds the light of the saving word on the reality of injustice so as to inspire the church to struggle for liberation."<sup>42</sup> Pastoral care for gender problems must include social action that uncovers gender injustice and its roots and calls for equitable involvement and participation in the church and sociopolitical life.

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<sup>40</sup> Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 33, 40–41. Lartey distinguishes five major models of pastoral care: pastoral care as therapy, pastoral care as ministry, pastoral care as social action, pastoral care as empowerment, and pastoral care as personal interaction. Lartey defines these modalities of pastoral care on the basis of the assumptions that guide each specific approach to pastoral care. Each model emphasizes a specific dimension of human experience and is oriented toward meeting a specific need. Lartey indicates that these five models are not mutually exclusive; there may be even some overlap between them in actual practice. The distinction helps to clarify the assumptions and presuppositions and/or the foundations upon which models of pastoral care are based.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1987), 7, cited in Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 32.

The model of pastoral care as empowerment puts an emphasis on the fact that there is worth and value within human persons.<sup>43</sup> This model implies that human beings, no matter what their situation, have some pre-existing strengths and resources that, when appropriately called forth, can enable them to address their situation and bring about change. The task of pastoral care under this model is "the drawing out and building up of the unnoticed strengths and resources within and around people and communities."<sup>44</sup> This pastoral task involves the use of educational and dialogical methods in facilitating the achievement of the goals of empowerment. Pastoral caregivers, under this model, seek to *conscientize*<sup>45</sup> the marginalized and oppressed so that they will actualize their potential resources and be able to ask questions about their life situation, and in so doing, bring about change.

I see African women's theology as standing in these two models of pastoral care, though not exclusively. I believe it can contribute significantly to the enrichment of pastoral agents and leaders in their fulfillment of their vocation to care, or to use John Patton's phrase, "to let God's scattered people know that they are heard and remembered."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, to make a significant difference in the lives of African women,

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<sup>43</sup> Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> For a complete discussion of the concept and method of conscientization see especially the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated from Portuguese by Myra B. Ramos (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972).

<sup>46</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 4.

men and children, pastoral care cannot be content with privatized interventions alone.

"To enable and motivate persons and groups to think and act in ways that will result in greater freedom and participation in the life of the societies of which they are a part,"<sup>47</sup>

pastoral care must be both a private and public enterprise. As a private activity, pastoral care will be concerned with helping individuals and families through developmental crises and losses and with their personal and interpersonal struggles and needs for growth. In the case of African women afflicted by sexist practices, pastoral care will have to take seriously women's suffering and provide opportunities for healing. As a public enterprise, pastoral care must go beyond private interventions to address the cultural and societal roots of people's suffering, brokenness, and truncated growth.

Indeed, pastoral care must show concern for the transformation of structures of alienation and oppression into a reconciled community<sup>48</sup> --a community in which all participants are given opportunities for healing, self-fulfillment, and growth. As such, pastoral care must engage in dismantling oppressive structures and changing cultural and societal values and norms that constrict women's growth toward wholeness. As Clinebell observes, "privatized pastoral care and counseling (along with privatized religion in general) ignore

<sup>47</sup> Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere I have discussed the role of pastoral care in transforming structures of alienation and disconnection in a multicultural setting, by contributing to the building of communities in which differences of race, culture, language, and nationality are affirmed, with God being the sole unifying and integrative center that relativizes everything else. See my inaugural lecture at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, "Consciousness of Context in Pastoral Care and the Issue of Multiculturalism," October 1999. This lecture is published in the *Journal of Theology*, (summer 2000): 29-47. The *Journal of Theology* is a joint publication of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

the pervasive ways in which racism, sexism, ageism, classism, speciesism, nationalism, militarism, economic exploitation, and political oppression cripple human wholeness on a massive scale in all societies." Clinebell goes on to note that, to correct this problem, "the pastoral care of groups and institutions must be seen as the other side of personal and relational healing and growth work."<sup>49</sup> Clinebell's argument echoes the position of African women's view of how women's personal life is intricately tied to public life, for good and for ill. African women's theology and family systems theory are in harmony with Clinebell's view that "there can be no full or long-term wholeness for individuals and families in a broken world, a world that destroys wholeness by its systems of injustice, poverty, violence and exploitation."<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, pastoral care that is informed by the faith of African women theologians, and a systemic perspective, cannot focus only on the care of the individual or the family. Rather, it will include in its consciousness the care of individuals, families, society, and the whole of creation.<sup>51</sup> As such, pastoral care that embodies the faith and hope of

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<sup>49</sup> Clinebell, *Basic Types*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Generally speaking, in family systems therapy as practiced by many family therapists, the focus is on the family unit in its nuclear or intergenerational form. But, as I indicated earlier, family systems theory as a worldview provides us with insights that can be used in thinking about larger systems such as the church, culture, society, and the whole created order.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Rukungah has written a compelling work suggesting a cosmocentric model of pastoral care and counseling that maintains in full view the healing resources from the whole of the ecosphere. See Peter Rukungah, *The Cosmocentric Model of Psychotherapy: A Contextualized Holistic Model from a Bantu African World View: A Perspective for Post-Modern Pastoral Psychotherapy*, Ph.D. diss., Claremont School of Theology, 1994 (Ann Arbor: Mich.: UMI, 1995).

African women, indeed the best of the whole Christian tradition, must engage in the actualization of the human longing for wholeness through the work of "historical transformation."<sup>52</sup> As African theologian Jean-Marc Ela puts it, "faith impels us to toil in order that all reality becomes, in Jesus Christ, a new creation. Faith in the God of hope endows men and women with the energy that mobilizes them to ready the new morning of a new creation."<sup>53</sup> I see in these words an injunction to become concerned, in pastoral care, with the reinventing of the unfinished world placed in our hands by God. In the case of this dissertation, I see African pastoral care being called to challenge the church's neglect and reluctance to embrace the gifts and resources of African women in its total life. I also see pastoral care engaging in challenging families to value both male and female members and to provide equal opportunities for the growth of all. African pastoral care has the task of promoting basic change in attitude and approach to gender relations if the new community is to be really ushered in. African women and men must be challenged and invited to work together for the vision of wholeness in community to be realized.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See Ackermann, "A Voice was Heard in Ramah," 89.

<sup>53</sup> Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 93.

<sup>54</sup> Congolese theologians Pétronille Kayiba and Flavien Muzumanga (respectively, female and male) have teamed up to write a fascinating work that critically analyzes the place of African women in the Catholic church in Africa, and have proposed that "woman" has to be considered as a "social category" or "social structure" for her to really participate fully in the church and society. See Kayiba and Muzumanga, *La Femme à L'Heure de L'Eglise Famille en Afrique* (Women in the Era of the Church-as-Family), manuscript submitted for publication at Kinshasa, Congo, Faculté Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1995. I am indebted to Sr. Christine Mabonzo, a Congolese nun and Ph.D. student in the philosophy of religion and theology program at Claremont Graduate

African women's theology helps us to broaden the focus of pastoral care and to orient the mission of the church toward a wholesome practice of the faith in the family and church, which may lead to the improvement not only of gender relations, but also of relations between opposing political parties, ethnic conflicts, and tensions across religions.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, gender awareness can make a difference in our theology, in our practice of pastoral care and counseling, and in our life together in community.

### Case Illustration

In the following section, I will present a case from the writings of African feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro to illustrate some of the issues of concern to African women theologians, and I will suggest how to respond pastorally and approach cases like these based on the ideas and insights gleaned from family systems theory, African women's theology, pastoral theology, and the perichoretic view of human personhood and relationships developed in Chapter 5.

### The Story of Aliviza<sup>56</sup>

I was married at the age of 19, immediately after completing form 4. We had a beautiful church wedding and I continued teaching at Sunday school in my new church just as I had done in the church where I grew up. When I could not conceive within six months, the women began to ask me what was wrong. After one year there was still no sign of pregnancy. My sisters-in-law started to make

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University for having shared with me some of her research done in Kinshasa, Democratic Congo on women in church, theology, and society. She pointed me to this source and shared with me a manuscript copy of it when it was still in press.

<sup>55</sup> I believe that gender analysis in theological reflection on the church and on the theory and practice of pastoral theology, care, and counseling has the potential for providing us with the categories (or language) to address issues of ethnicity, race, generation, class, etc. These are all categories of difference, representing a reality that the church struggles with in Africa as elsewhere in the world.

<sup>56</sup> This story is from Kanyoro, "Challenge," 178-79.

up stories that I had been a loose woman and had abortions before marriage. That was very upsetting, because it was not true.

During the second year, my husband started coming home late and finding fault with me for everything. If he knocked at the door and I did not run to open it, he would call me lazy and punch me. His whole family also insulted me in many ways. I talked to the pastor but he simply told me to persevere and not do anything to annoy my husband; I should know that he is the head of the family. I went to many doctors who all said that they could not find out what was wrong with me. They never asked to see my husband. For a long time I did not dare suggest to my husband that he should go to the doctor too, because it seemed normal to everybody that it was my problem. One day I dared to ask him to have a medical examination also, and my fears were justified; he beat me thoroughly. Infertility or barrenness, it was said, was a woman's issue.

Life became unbearable and I decided to return to my parents' home. My mother was embarrassed about my problem and did not want to talk about it. She welcomed me but never said anything about the situation I was running away from. For my father, I simply did not exist. He was so embarrassed that he never looked straight at me, let alone talked to me. There were lots of chores to occupy me and keep me out of the way.

I worked at my parents' farm during the day, and in the house during the evenings until my brothers and their wives started to insult me. They said that I had come back home so as to cause problems with the land inheritance. Each of my brothers swore that he would not even bury my body on his piece of land. I spoke to my mother about these insults; she was again silent and simply said that she would talk to my brothers.

My brothers and their wives said I was a shame to the home by my life of singleness. I answered back in protest, everybody including my mother would tell me not to be rude to my brothers when they were the owners of the home where I was getting free lodging. After some time I debated whether to kill myself or just leave. I decided to leave, although I had nowhere to go. I moved to the city. (Aliviza, Kenya).

### **Preliminary Comments**

Before delving into the issues raised in this case illustration, it is important to note that relational patterns and family structures and dynamics are not all the same in African settings; not even in the same country. As I discuss this case study, I am indebted to Hilde Mukanya, my wife, for suggesting that I avoid generalizations about gender relations in African contexts. In numerous conversations with me, Hilde has maintained that while the issues of African women's gender discrimination are real, some of the women theologians used in this dissertation have generalized experiences from some groups of women to all African women. She notes, for example, that gender dynamics

are influenced by factors such as level of education, class, and whether one lives in an urban setting or a rural milieu, among other factors. It is with this perspective and awareness that I approach this case study, cognizant of the existence of intra-cultural diversity, and the importance of avoiding deadening generalizations. However, I do also maintain that while the issues in the above case are in some ways unique to Aliviza's family and her social location, they can also be viewed as reflective of realities in Aliviza's culture.

### **Issues Raised in the Case**

To understand the problems and dynamics involved in the issues in this case, we need to realize that the internal interactions of family members, and the presenting problem(s), must be viewed as being more than an internal event or an intrafamilial problem, independent of the larger African cultural and societal context. Indeed, problems internal to the family may reflect problems in the larger culture. If this is the case, and I believe it is in this story, we need to design pastoral strategies that redress these problems both in the family and in the culture. As North-American feminist theorist Rachel T. Hare-Mustin argues, "When we alter the internal functioning of families without concern for the social, economic, and political context, we are in complicity with the society to keep the family unchanged."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, family dysfunction must not be viewed simply as an internal event, i.e., an intrafamilial problem, independent of the cultural context. In most instances, to gain a greater understanding of its genesis and maintenance, the intrafamilial problem must always be seen as located in its larger socio-cultural context. This is the perspective I take in the following analysis and assessment of this case study.

The main presenting problem in Aliviza's story is the issue of childlessness, i.e., infertility or barrenness (as the narrator herself points out). A brief discussion of this

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<sup>57</sup> Hare-Mustin, "Problem of Gender in Family Therapy Theory," 68.



issue in its wider cultural context is important as we begin to think of ways to respond and provide pastoral care and counseling. Therefore, a background of the African perspective on the issue of infertility and childbearing is in order. In traditional African contexts, infertility is considered not a medical or scientific problem but a religious problem. Barrenness is considered one of the worse misfortunes a person can experience, especially a woman. As E.M. Uka suggests, having children is considered to be the supreme reason for marriage. "Most African myths of creation point to the fact that God created man and woman and bid them to go into the world and multiply. Procreation therefore becomes a mark of God's favour on marriage. Hence among Africans, no marriage ceremony is concluded without a request to God and the ancestors to let the new couple bear many children."<sup>58</sup> So, children are held in high esteem in African tradition. They are believed to bring honor, dignity, and joy to the couple; and they are viewed as giving parents "boldness to speak in a gathering."<sup>59</sup> Since in the African traditional setting success, prestige, joy, honor, dignity, and consolation (among other good things) are attributed to having children, "not to have children in such an environment," as Uka observes, "is to be in hell while on earth."<sup>60</sup> Scholars of African traditional life and religion have pointed out the prevalence of this belief in African traditional societies and its influence in contemporary Africa. Opoku, for example, notes that

The inability to produce offspring is considered one of the greatest misfortunes in African societies. Barrenness, sterility and the unmarried state are threats to human existence and are therefore condemned by many West African societies. So serious is this calamity that in some African societies childless people cannot

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<sup>58</sup> E.M. Uka, "The African Family and Issues of Women's Infertility," unpublished paper presented at the first conference of the African Association of Pastoral Studies and Counseling held in Nairobi, Kenya, 1985, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 4.

become ancestors after death.<sup>61</sup>

Because there is a strong emphasis on continuing the family lineage by bearing children--the continuation of life--not fulfilling this shows lack of compliance with ancestral mandate or legacy to ensure the life of ancestors on earth. John Mbiti has also noted, for instance, that

The supreme purpose of marriage according to African peoples is to bear children, to build a family, to extend life, and to hand down the living torch of human existence. For that reason, a marriage becomes fully so only when one or more children have been born. It is a very tragic thing when no children come out of a marriage. Then people do not consider it to be truly a marriage and other arrangements are made to obtain children in the family.<sup>62</sup>

Given this perspective on marriage and family life, children are clearly central to the marriage and to family life itself. Because marriage and family life are sacred, having children or not having children is considered a religious problem. God is seen as the giver of children and, by implication, the withholder of children.<sup>63</sup> Not having children may be viewed as the workings of the forces of evil, or a punishment from God for sinful behavior. Aliviza, in our case study, is being accused of having been a "loose woman" and "having abortions before marriage." Although this is not clearly stated in the story, it could be one of the reasons, from the point of view of her accusers, for the withholding of children from Aliviza. As stated earlier, we see in this case not only the conflicts and problems internal to the family, but also their entrenchment in the culture. The pastoral task, as we shall discuss later, will have to involve designing interventions and strategies to address problems internal to the family, as well as their rootedness in the culture. But first, let us discuss Aliviza in her marriage and family life.

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<sup>61</sup> Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Accra, Ghana: F.E.P. International, 1978), 125.

<sup>62</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 110.

<sup>63</sup> Uka, "African Family," 5.

### **Aliviza in her marriage and family**

**It is interesting to note that Aliviza's difficulty begins with other women (her sisters-in-law) "making up stories" about her "infertility." This may be indicative of African women theologians' contention about how some women have internalized confining cultural definitions and expectations of women. This is an important point to note as we consider culture-wide influence on individuals and families. It is interesting that it is other women who begin the "blaming game." It is they who view Aliviza as not fulfilling her role as a woman and wife. Pastoral care that is relevant and responsive to the theology of African women must take this fact very seriously. When dealing with oppressive gender expectations, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that in some instances it is women who oppress other women, having internalized patriarchal expectations of gender roles. Pastoral care aimed at the larger socio-cultural context would help both women and men unlearn attitudes and values that diminish each other in the process or efforts to conform to gender-based cultural prescriptions. Values and structures that stand in the way of women's full realization of their worth and dignity must be combated with more encompassing means that reach people on a larger scale. I will discuss this when I suggest possible pastoral interventions that would redress problematic gender expectations and practices. Let me return to the analysis of the issues in Aliviza's marriage and family of origin.**

**The presenting problem begins in Aliviza's interactions with other women, especially her sisters-in-law, and then enters the marital relationship, and eventually her family of origin. Throughout this case study, it is clear that there is an imbalance of fairness in Aliviza's relationships with her sisters-in-law, with her husband, and with her family of origin. Thus, I think contextual therapy's emphasis on relational ethics (i.e., the acquisition of equitable balance of fairness among family members) would be an appropriate modality to use in our assessment and intervention strategies. It will be supplemented by insights from the perichoretic view of the person and community**

discussed earlier in this chapter. As noted in Chapter 4, among the four dimensions that make up the relational context (facts, psychology, transactions, and relational ethics), relational ethics is the cornerstone of contextual theory. It is viewed as a basis on which well-functioning relationships are built. Underlying the notion of relational ethics is the concept of balance of fairness. Contextual theory maintains that to achieve an equitable balance of fairness among family members, emphasis should be placed on responding to the basic life interests of each person. This balance of fairness is, therefore, the basis for healthy family functioning. When it is missing, there is ethical stagnation in the family or relationship.

There surely is ethical stagnation in our case. There is no fair consideration of Aliviza's interests and well-being. She is alone in her struggles. It seems in this case that Aliviza is burdened with the "cultural charge" to find out why she is not conceiving. In her search for understanding and professional support she goes to see her pastor alone; but she does not get the kind of care and support she needs. Likewise, she goes alone to see the doctors. Here, she seems to have gained an understanding that there is "nothing wrong with her." Unfortunately, the doctors have not suggested that her husband undergo the same series of medical exams. Aliviza, on her own, suggests that her husband has medical exams also, since "the doctors could not find out what was wrong with me." Her husband's response is indicative of the imbalance of fairness in their relationship--verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. She states, "During the second year [of marriage], my husband started coming home late and finding fault with me for everything." Aliviza's husband is probably under pressure from his own family of origin and the culture to have children, so much so that he seems to not value the companionship and friendship of Aliviza. He hits her also because of cultural support for physical violence against women.

Because "life became unbearable," Aliviza decides to "return to my parents' home." From a contextual perspective, her return reveals even further how Aliviza's

vitaly needed relational world and resources are fragmented. Her family of origin, like her husband's family, blames her for her predicament. This is another indication that childlessness is traditionally viewed as a result of one's misbehavior. Aliviza becomes marginalized in her own family of origin. Her mother is embarrassed about her infertility (and probably her decision to leave her husband), which is another revelation of how women internalize patriarchal expectations and gender role definitions, and as a result, participate in the oppression of other women. Clearly, the entitlements and merits of Aliviza are not being satisfied. Aliviza's mother does not want to talk about her situation. Her father ignores her and does not talk to her. Her siblings and their spouses resent her presence.

It is interesting to note the additional reason for Aliviza's marginalization. Her brothers and their wives said that she was a shame to her family by her "life of singleness." This point reinforces Opoku's observations that both infertility and the unmarried state are viewed as threats to human existence. Aliviza's singleness now compounds her problems and deepens her loneliness and isolation.

#### **Pastoral and psychotherapeutic interventions**

Aliviza's situation and her struggles point to the importance of adequate pastoral care and counseling sensitive to gender issues raised by African women theologians. I see two levels of pastoral interventions here. The first level may be called personal/interpersonal, and the second level societal/socio-cultural. On the first level of intervention, the pastoral task should focus on what has already become a crisis situation for Aliviza. Pastoral interventions should focus on providing a sustaining pastoral presence that, hopefully, would mediate healing by helping reconcile her to her true self. Included in this work is the affirmation of her sense of self, dignity, and worth, independent of the cultural expectations for reproductive abilities and married status. Here, pastoral interventions must affirm what Aliviza has done to maintain her sense of self through her horrific struggle. The pastor or pastoral counselor must identify and

recognize Aliviza's strengths and skills, as well as acknowledge her resourcefulness. The following affirmations may be used to support and encourage Aliviza:

--What you have experienced in your marriage and family of origin is wrong because marriage is first and foremost about companionship and friendship, and family is about nurturing and support. Both your marriage and your family of origin have failed you.

--The way you have been treated by your husband and family is not appropriate because you are a person of sacred worth. Your dignity and integrity have been violated and your basic rights have not been respected.

--Not having children is not your fault, and this was proven by the medical exams you went through. Nevertheless, even if you were unable to bear children, it still would not have been your fault as many other people do not bear children because of physical and medical conditions for which they are not responsible.

--You deserve a relationship (marriage) in which you are valued for who you are, and not for your reproductive abilities.

--You don't deserve to be hit and abused, because you are created in the image of God and have the right to be respected.

--You have the right to be treated fairly, because you are a valued child of God.

--You can make a better life for yourself, because there are many opportunities and possibilities for living your life.

--You have the right to make decisions that protect you from abuse and harm.

--As far as your marriage is concerned, you have done what you can possibly do to make things work.

--Your life has value, with or without children. Your involvement in the educational ministry of the church, and in the larger community, is a great contribution to the "continuation" of life and the strengthening of the community.

Pastoral interventions should also facilitate the expression of anger and rage, and also address the suicidal ideation prompted by her being rejected by her husband and her own family of origin. Also of significant importance is an affirmation of Aliviza's decision "to leave" both her husband and her family of origin. While Bowen theory may view this as a cutoff, I see this as Aliviza's efforts to differentiate, and to affirm her sense of worth and dignity. Again, as stated above, the first dimension of pastoral strategies and interventions should focus on the affirmation of Aliviza's worth, her dignity and integrity. Coupled with this is the prevention of her mental, emotional, and spiritual "breakdown." The restoration of relational balance, even when approaching this case from a contextual perspective, does not hold a primary place in my pastoral strategies. This is something that I would rank in a secondary position until Aliviza has started to reconstruct a new narrative of her *self*. When this is achieved, or in the process of being achieved, then I would focus on helping Aliviza to restore some relational balance in her family of origin. As a pastor informed by African women's analysis of gender dynamics, I would not encourage her even to consider investing in exploring a possible restoration of her relationship with her husband at this point. I would move in this direction only *if* this is what Aliviza wants, and only if her husband is willing to reconsider his perspective on Aliviza's presumed infertility, and his willingness to recognize that he has abused her trust and broken the covenant to "cherish and honor her in sickness and in health." He has to show a commitment to repent and change radically.

Since Aliviza has already left her husband, it would be appropriate to at least focus the pastoral work on herself and on the facilitation of healing through her multiple traumas and losses. Here, pastoral work will be geared toward addressing Aliviza's personal injury and her experience of betrayal from trusted persons in her life. The goal is to help her express and process her feelings of anger, frustrations, betrayal, and rage toward her husband, her parents, siblings, and significant others, in the safety of the pastoral presence. As far as grief is concerned, Aliviza will be encouraged to grieve her

multiple losses of marriage, the hopes and dreams related to that, and her significant relationships within and without her family of origin. Through grieving, she will hopefully let go of previously unmet personal and interpersonal needs. What was missed or lost will be acknowledged, grieved, and relinquished. Pastoral work will then focus on affirming Aliviza's efforts and ability to move on with her life.

The mistakes made by Aliviza's pastor must be avoided. He or she seemed to be oblivious to her suffering, was concerned with "protecting" Aliviza's husband from her anger or frustration, and thus consigned Aliviza to a subservient place in the marriage. In doing this, the pastor was not acknowledging Aliviza's pain, and he was repressing her feelings and experience. Her pastor's recommendation "to persevere and not do anything to annoy" her husband is clearly revelatory of some of the sexist pastoral care work being done not only in some African settings, but also around the world. His recommendation reveals his traditional and biblicist view that probably maintains that the husband is the head of the household and the wife has a secondary place in marriage and family. A good Christian wife must always sacrifice herself to maintain peace in the household. Such a perspective only deepens the suffering of Aliviza and victimizes her further. Later in this discussion, I will talk about the importance for pastors to break free from cultural stereotypes that confine women's existence, if they are to provide life-affirming pastoral care and counseling to their female parishioners who are afflicted by sexist practices in their families and society at large. Let me now suggest how I would address systematically issues in Aliviza's story, following the methodological guidelines proposed by contextual systems theory. Here, the focus will be on the relational dynamics in Aliviza's family of origin, although I will also mention how to address some dynamics in her marriage.

To address the relational imbalance in Aliviza's family of origin, the emphasis should be on leading family members (her parents, siblings and their spouses) into active pursuit of reestablishing relational balance with Aliviza. Pastors will have to develop



skills and the courage to provide leadership in redressing the destructive scapegoating and blaming that is going on. The existent ethical stagnation would be treated following the three methodological guidelines suggested by contextual theory: ethical re-engagement, the bridging of manifest adverseness, and the re-assessment of legacy expectations and payments. Let me elaborate on this.

- **Ethical re-engagement**

Some of what I have already discussed above involves the work of ethical re-engagement: assessing imbalance of fairness and relational dynamics internal to the family. Other aspects of this work will involve assessing emotional proximity or distance between family members, the existence of attitudes of indifference, and the presence of abuse. Pastoral caregiving will focus on helping her express how she feels about her experience in her marriage and family of origin, exploring and naming the relational injustices she feels she is going through and facilitating the grieving process over unmet needs and losses. As far as pastoral care of the family-of-origin is concerned, the pastoral caregiver will help Aliviza's parents and brothers explore the dynamics underlying their emotional proximity between parents and the brothers, and emotional distance between the parents, the brothers and Aliviza. What is it that makes them shun Aliviza? Why are they more close to themselves than to her? Are they aware of the longterm costs to Aliviza's well-being?

- **The bridging of manifest adverseness**

This may be one of the most difficult pastoral and therapeutic tasks. I would not focus on trying to "bridge" the relationship between Aliviza and her family, but rather on her expression of how she feels she is unfairly treated by her family. Then I would have her family respond to her statements, thus giving them an opportunity to assess how their behaviors contribute to Aliviza's distress. I would anticipate serious difficulties in trying to have the family respond to Aliviza's experience of distress and unfair treatment. The parents and brothers may choose to mobilize their culture and traditions on their side.

They might say again, “Aliviza is an embarrassment to our family.” “She is a shame to the home by her life of singleness.” The brothers might add that “she had come back home so as to cause problems with the land inheritance.” I would, certainly, have Aliviza clarify whether this last comment really reflected her intentions in coming back to her family-of-origin. Once this is made clear, I will try to focus on exploring and naming aspects of culture and traditions that have victimized an innocent woman.

At this point, it would be necessary to do some educational work about issues of infertility, and also ask Aliviza to tell her family the kind of medical tests she has had and what the doctors told her. They have never given her a chance to share this information with them. They will need also to hear about how Aliviza’s husband treated her, how he abused her. This would also be an opportunity for the pastoral caregiver to add that as things are now, it is probable that Aliviza’s “presumed barrenness” has roots in her former husband’s physical condition or medical problems, etc. Hopefully, adversity will be lessened as Aliviza articulates her pain, the family listens and responds, and the pastor or pastoral counselor educates the family and facilitates the healing process.

- The re-assessment of legacy expectations and payments

Here, I would consider how contextual therapy’s four dimensions of the relational context,<sup>64</sup> discussed in Chapter 4, contribute to the problem in Aliviza’s life story. In the category of *facts* I would assess the following: How do gender expectations and religious beliefs contribute to the problem? Without a doubt, the legacy or heritage of both Aliviza’s family and her husband’s family have a bearing on her predicament. The seemingly incompatible needs and role demands and expectations appear to be coming from their cultural heritage. These legacy expectations and demands clearly cause damage to Aliviza’s dignity, destiny, and worth as a child of God. The values and norms around childbearing exclude other venues for self-fulfillment and satisfaction apart from

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<sup>64</sup> These include facts, individual psychology, transactions, and relational ethics.

being a biological parent. In aligning themselves with the traditional demands and legacies on childbearing, Aliviza's husband, and her own parents and siblings have failed to see Aliviza in her totality. As Musimbi Kanyoro observes, "The family in Africa, while being the center of the support system, also has all the potential of being a nesting place for gender subordination of women."<sup>65</sup> Pastoral care and counseling that is informed by African women's theology, and the perichoretic view of humans and community will involve an educational element that promotes the view that Aliviza is more than a "presumed childless woman." She is a child of God endowed with gifts and graces that are already being used in the church and the community for the common good. By virtue of her being created in the image of God, she is a person of sacred worth in and of herself and must not be measured by her reproductive abilities. Further, she exhibits other qualities that can be affirmed as of value "in the promotion of life" expected of her. As mentioned above, she was a Sunday school teacher, a very important role in the life of the church and community. She works with children and teaches them about the Christian faith and life. Is not that a great contribution to the promotion of life? Indeed, there must be other aspects of Aliviza's life that must be called forth to affirm her worth and dignity in the family, community, and the church.

- Individual psychology

Aliviza's individual experiences and needs are to be assessed and responded to. This has already been discussed above. It seems to me that an important problem for her in this category is the lack of trustworthy relationships. Because of the absence of trust in her significant relationships, Aliviza seems to be removed from any sense of hope in her struggle. This absence of hope explains her struggle, at some points, "to kill myself or just leave." The deep injury to Aliviza's self, and her anger in the face of this personal injury, must be acknowledged by the pastor or pastoral counselor, and by her family. I

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<sup>65</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 178.

would interpret her anger to her as conveying a number of things: that violations have been made against her, and that her anger conveys a sense of self-respect and self-worth, as well as her search for relational justice. I would also be very intentional about trying to help her find hope through the pastoral relationship and her involvement in the faith community. Aliviza's pastor in the story has missed a great opportunity to fulfill adequately his or her role in this regard.

- **Transactions**

The transactions between Aliviza and her husband are exploitative and diminishing. She is expected to fulfill "a need" without due consideration of her own needs and who she is as a person. This is observed in her husband's behavior, his neglecting her and beating her, and his refusal even to heed her concern and request that he also undergo some medical exams. Aliviza's family-of-origin also mistreats her and oppresses her for leaving her husband, and for "bringing shame to her family" by her life of singleness. This category reveals problems in relational patterns and issues that have been addressed above. Suffice it to say that the pastor or pastoral counselor must promote here an open discussion between Aliviza and her family-of-origin on the personal and relational violations incurred by Aliviza.

- **Relational ethics**

This dimension of the contextual approach is founded on the assumption that each family member is entitled to a fair consideration of his or her welfare interests by virtue of his or her birth and existence. What needs to be assessed here are the two end poles on the continuum of relational ethics: entitlement and indebtedness. Aliviza is entitled to fair treatment. She deserves respect, honor, and support from her husband, but does not receive them from him. On the other end, Aliviza's husband seems to hold that she "owes" him a child, and is frustrated because she is not conceiving. It seems that there is no mutual consideration and exchange in Aliviza's marriage and in her family transactions. There is no mutual caring for one another's needs. No empathy. No mutual

satisfaction. There is no fairness and, as a consequence, no trust. From a contextual perspective, when these elements are missing, therapeutic goals may include the following: beginning to face intermember fairness and legacies; reducing unfair legacy expectations by acknowledging them; correcting one-sided, sometimes distorted, always unaddressed views of each other; rebalancing the give and take balance among family members by taking initial steps toward personal accountability for responsible action. Again, in this case, a sense of concern for the well-being of Aliviza is missing. Since this is the case, family members must be helped to face the existent unfairness and unjust legacies and expectations. The pastor or pastoral caregiver must acknowledge the unfair legacy expectations and the injustice and the hurt they have caused in Aliviza's life by pointing this out to them. He or she must also correct the one-sided and distorted way Aliviza is viewed. By doing these things the pastoral caregiver may begin to restore the proper view of each family member, and human being, as having dignity and worth by virtue of their existence. Some resources from African traditional religion may also be used. Childlessness as one of the main causes of marriage breakdowns contradicts some aspects of African traditional understanding of parenthood. In African tradition parenthood is not necessarily a biological status. For example, an unmarried sibling who is under age or of age is usually called "mother" or father" so and so by the children of older or younger siblings. This practice could be interpreted to mean that in Africa there is no childless person. Every person is a parent, and a child of somebody. From this perspective, there is no adequate reason why a person can be mistreated for not having biological children. This view could be a tremendous pastoral resource for people struggling with issues of childlessness or infertility in African contexts.

Another important issue to consider is the issue of boundaries. From a structural therapy perspective, a focus on boundaries would, in the long run, prevent further interference in marital problems. In our case study, Aliviza's crisis seems to have started with her sisters-in-law blaming her for childlessness, indicating some influence and

pressure from the family-of-origin of Aliviza's husband. In situations where this is the case, pastors must reinforce the setting of boundaries between subsystems so that siblings, the couple, parents and other relatives remain in their proper location, thus avoiding intrusion and the creation of relational imbalance in marriages.

As I stated earlier, the foregoing discussion has focused on the personal/interpersonal aspects of pastoral attention and interventions. I would like now to turn to the societal/socio-cultural aspects of the pastoral task. Since Aliviza's situation reveals the problems that exist in the culture regarding the value of childbearing and the marginalizing effects of childlessness, pastoral interventions must address the cultural and societal roots of people's suffering. Such focus might, in the long run, prevent further unnecessary suffering caused by unjust cultural expectations and attitudes. The focus here must be on calling a new gender consciousness into existence. The model of pastoral care as social action, discussed earlier in this chapter, seems most adequate in addressing issues of injustice, domination, subordination, and discrimination in the larger socio-cultural context. Privatized interventions, or interventions geared to only change dynamics internal to the family would not effect lasting change on the larger scale. As Rachel T. Hare-Mustin observes, "differentiation and clarification of the self are utopian tasks for women until the structure of the family and society changes."<sup>66</sup> To really help women, or men for that matter, in their efforts to define their sense of self, we must address cultural aspects that limit and hamper their growth and development. Pastors and pastoral counselors must join African women theologians "to name the oppressive aspects of our cultures"<sup>67</sup> so that women and men will all experience the fullness of life and the liberating promise of God in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>66</sup> Hare-Mustin, "Problem of Gender in Family Therapy Theory," 68.

<sup>67</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 178.

The above discussion points to the importance for developing pastoral skills, awareness, and sensitivity in order to provide adequate pastoral care that is responsive to African women's concerns and commitments to developing *right relationships* and true human community. To provide gender-sensitive pastoral care and counseling it is necessary for pastors, pastoral caregivers, and pastoral counselors to be able to deal with their attitudes and expectations regarding gender roles and differences. Pastors, pastoral caregivers, and pastoral counselors must be able to identify how much they have been influenced by cultural expectations and attitudes denounced by African women theologians. By identifying these aspects, clergy and counselors must be very clear about how much these attitudes influence their approaches to pastoral work with women and men. The goal of this is to diminish the limitations of constricting cultural values and practices on pastoral work, especially with women.

It is important that the pastor be committed to gender equality and gain freedom from culturally-defined gender stereotypes for him or her to offer the kind of pastoral care that enhances, supports, and encourages women's development and growth. It is especially important, in working with women such as Aliviza and her family, that the pastor not place blame on the woman. The pastor who is informed by African feminist analysis of gender relations and a family systems outlook would be able to reframe relational difficulties by placing them in the larger socio-cultural and religious framework. Pastors who are informed, guided, and inspired by the vision of African women theologians, a systemic perspective, and a perichoretic vision that I have developed in this dissertation would make a great difference in caring for women such as Aliviza who are afflicted by constricting cultural values and practices. Pastors who operate from this perspective would not see this woman as bound to the cultural image which is being forced on her. He or she will see her in a broader way, with all her

possibilities. A pastor informed by this sensitivity would help Aliviza explore other ways of being and relating that would yield satisfaction in her life. Indeed, gender-sensitive pastors will beware of attitudes and expectations held by society and individuals, as well as their own attitudes and expectations. They will also question and challenge culturally-defined stereotypes and promote new images of women suggested by African women theologians. They will be committed to helping women gain freedom from confining norms and practices by promoting the differentiation, clarification, and affirmation of women's dignity, worth, and integrity as children of God. Emma Justes' wisdom, from a North American context, can also be applied in an African setting. "[Pastors and pastoral counselors] who find that they are unable to travel the route of enabling women to break free from cultural stereotypes that define their existence, should not be doing pastoral counseling with women."<sup>68</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

African feminist theology's longing for well-being and wholeness for women, men, children, and social structures, and family systems theory's understanding of our essential human connectedness provide new ways of thinking about pastoral care in the African context. First, pastoral care must create and promote a vision of fullness of life for all.<sup>69</sup> This pastoral activity would involve removing all obstacles found on the way toward wholeness for all women, men, and children. Second, pastoral care, to fulfill its Christian calling, must go beyond the private sphere to address issues in the public arena.

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<sup>68</sup> Emma Justes, "Women," in *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, ed. Robert Wicks, Richard D. Parsons, and Donald Capps (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 298.

<sup>69</sup> John 10:10.



This is so important as there is an interconnectedness between the *private* and *public* aspects of life. Third, pastoral caregivers must be aware of how the broad cultural, social, political and economic realities affect individuals and families. And finally, pastoral care that takes seriously these factors will be oriented toward interventions that address individuals, families, communities, and societies more wholistically. This way of conceiving and practicing pastoral care will require that we hold a clear theological vision in which women, men, and children are embraced as children of God, with sacred worth—this vision is captured in the African feminist-systemic-perichoretic model of the church and the family proposed in this dissertation. Coupled with this is an unambiguous commitment to listening to women, children, and men, and viewing them as having real concerns that, when addressed pastorally, may improve our life together. Indeed, out of African women's theology and family systems theory a wholistic vision of ministry has emerged.

We now turn to Chapter 7 where I provide some recommendations for enabling African pastoral theology, care, and counseling to respond more effectively to the problems in gender relations raised by African women theologians. It is here that I will propose what men can do concretely to increase gender justice. A brief discussion of future research needs uncovered by this dissertation will also be provided.

## CHAPTER 7

### Summary, Recommendations, and Areas for Further Research

#### Introduction

I pointed out in Chapter 1 how no African pastoral theological work to date studies family systems theory and therapy using the theological analysis of gender relations and women's status done by African women theologians. To correct this gap, I initiated a study that approaches family systems theory from the rich perspectives of the literature by African women theologians discussing women's experience in the family, the church, and society. By engaging family systems theory with the concerns of African women's theology, I have set in motion what I hope will be the beginning of a critical dialogue between African women's theology and pastoral theology, care, and counseling in the African context. I have shown how what African feminist theologians are saying about gender relations and our life together is too important for it not to be viewed as central to the vital areas of pastoral needs to which African pastoral theology and the church respond. Therefore, I have suggested that the problems in gender relations identified by African women theologians should be among issues by which Christian pastoral theology and care finds its vocation and its vitality in African contexts.

#### Summary

From this study of African women's theology, gender relations, and systemic family theory, the following conclusions may be drawn concerning the contributions of this study to Christian pastoral theology and care in African contexts. One of the great contributions of African women's theology to the church and African society is the telling of African women's stories and the insights about the importance of listening and

responding to these stories. African women theologians have taught us that African women's concerns are indeed human concerns. We can refuse to listen to them only to our common peril. Indeed, until very recently, African women's stories were largely private, untold and unknown. They were neither of particular interest to the wider theological community in African theological institutions, nor to the churches. Now that these stories are being told eloquently and publicly by African women theologians, African churches are being called to pay attention to these important issues being raised by African women's analysis of women's situations, and their proposals as to what needs to be done to correct and heal the unnecessary suffering of women in the family, church, and society.

Another contribution to the life of the church is the simple realization that African women are largely constricted by some inhibiting cultural values and religious beliefs. At the heart of the concern regarding African women's status in the family, church and society is the definition and assignment of roles and behaviors according to one's sex. African women theologians have pointed out how the assignment of roles and behaviors based on sex have been influenced, in part, by some Biblical interpretations that place women in a secondary position in relation to their male counterparts. Some of these questionable beliefs maintain that women's 'secondary nature' and her status as 'helpmate' were determined by her being created second (Gen. 2:21-23); and that the requirement for women to submit to their husband is defined by scripture (1Cor. 11:3 and 14:34; Eph. 5:22). African women theologians have contended that these Biblical and theological traditions and similar cultural affirmations and prescriptions have consolidated together to create a situation of oppression and marginalization for African women.

To counter these forces of diminution, African women theologians have suggested that there are Biblical and theological alternatives to how gender roles have been assigned in the church, family and society. In fact, they insist that the Biblical and theological alternatives to the constricting roles are not based on sex and/or gender, but rather on the theological claims that all human beings, female and male, are created in the image of God and thus are endowed with gifts and graces to share for the common good. Likewise, 1Cor. 12:4-11 and 27-31, and Eph. 4:4-16, are viewed as offering the possibility and vision of seeing roles as resulting from gifts of the Spirit bestowed in the community; and there is no hierarchy of gifts. Since all are made to drink of the same Spirit (1Cor. 12:13ff), all gifts are valued in their uniqueness and especially for what they contribute to the life of the whole community. Therefore African women theologians call women and men, in African contexts, to take very seriously their baptism and that of all members of the Body of Christ. Baptism is seen as signifying the transformation of individuals through initiation into the new "community of equals." In baptism, all members receive a new life in the Spirit and the renewal of their being so that they can live in the context of the Christian community.

However, the new call to live in community does not, as Jones puts it, "obliterate the particularities of people's lives." Rather "it enables the sustenance of common life through them."<sup>1</sup> So, African women theologians have taught us the importance of propagating the baptismal affirmation from Galatians that "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or

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<sup>1</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 167.

Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> And what we can learn from their perspective is that baptism is a very important theological category that can help us unlearn some constricting and inhibitive practices we have come to value in the church and in the family. Indeed, baptism *does* challenge our ecclesial and social practices to be more inclusive and reflective of the equality of all the gifts that are part of the community of faith, and thus, of families that pattern their lives after Christian teachings.

Moreover, the theological understanding of the church as the Body of Christ has a lot to offer to our understanding of Christian community and the practice of pastoral care. As I indicated in Chapters 5 and 6, the notion of the church as the Body of Christ reflects the gist of family systems thinking. This is especially so when family systems theory is viewed not only as a modality of therapy, but also as a worldview.<sup>3</sup> Family systems' understanding of our essential interconnectedness does certainly speak to the heart of pastoral care and counseling, as Kriesel suggests.<sup>4</sup> As Howard Clinebell says, "the goal of ministry, and of pastoral care and counseling, as vital dimensions of ministry, is the fullest possible liberation of persons in their total relational and societal contexts."<sup>5</sup> A

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<sup>2</sup> Gal. 3:2-29.

<sup>3</sup> Harold T. Kriesel has suggested that family systems theory is at its core an ontology--a way of talking about how the world is. See Kriesel, "Marriage and Family Counseling," in *Handbook for Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Howard W. Stone and William M. Clements (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 284.

<sup>4</sup> Kriesel, "Marriage and Family Counseling," 285.

<sup>5</sup> Clinebell, *Basic Types*, 28.

systemic perspective, as demonstrated in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, can help us achieve this goal because it deals with relationships and contexts of relationships. Further, systems thinking contains the theoretical and conceptual resources that can help us in the building of communities in which the differentiation of the self (or the development of individuality) and the affirmation of our interdependence and connectedness (or our communality) are held "in a healthy balance," to use Kriesel's phrase. Systems notions and insights about healthy human functioning in the family, or in any other emotional and relational system, provide us with ideas and directions as to how we can go about relating and living together in a healthy fashion. Affirmation of the need for each member's self-differentiation; the importance of maintaining permeable but healthy boundaries; the balance of give and take in all relationships (or the process of achieving an equitable balance of fairness among family members); and the importance of a flexible family organization for the functioning and well-being of family members, among other things, provide us with a solid foundation on which to build a perichoretic community as discussed in Chapter 5.

Indeed, family systems theory and African feminist theology affirm one of the basic tenets of our faith: the affirmation of our essential interconnectedness.<sup>6</sup> A pastoral perspective that takes both frameworks into account does produce a very solid response to the concerns of African women theologians, and thus lead to change and transformation of sexist structures and practices in church, family, and society. We now turn to some of the recommendations I would like to make for pastoral care that is

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<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Kriesel for this line of thought. See Kriesel, 286.

informed by African women's theology and family systems theory to be able to fulfill its role faithfully as it responds to the problems in gender relations.

### **Recommendations**

Throughout this study, the emphasis has been on striving for greater gender awareness and sensitivity, with a focus on how such awareness will contribute toward change in behavior and the building of true human community in the church, and promote the well-being and growth of all participants in family and society. I see African women's theology, and insights from family systems theory, as containing resources for designing pastoral strategies to effect change in gender relations, and hence, improve human relations in the family, church, and society. The following recommendations and strategies are therefore suggested to the church and its pastors and leaders:

1. Promote an awareness of gender issues and how gender dynamics affect the lives of women, men, children, and the whole human community. As stated throughout this dissertation, there is a great possibility that with an awareness about how gender affects us all (for good or for ill), we will be able to make choices that may improve our lives together. Therefore women and men must be exposed, through sermons, liturgy, and educational programs, to exploitative practices and be helped to envision and embrace changes that would protect the humanity and faith not only of African women and children, but also of men. The church must devise strategies of resistance against the constraints placed on women and marginalized persons, and to promote the idea that the differences between men and women ought to be complementary, and not exploitative.

2. Expose both women and men to the issues that typify African women's situation of oppression and marginalization with the goal of enabling all to see

themselves in light of women's experiences. These practices and goals can equip women, and other marginalized persons, to speak for themselves. They also offer men an opportunity to “reform” themselves through a “reprogramming” process that reexamines problematic images of men in culture and religion, and how these cause problems in male-female relationships. Included in this strategy is the development of methods of caring that will enable the church to restore people to *right relationships*.

3. Develop forms of pastoral care based on African women's ethics and praxis of *right relationships* and the systemic notion of self-differentiation, relational ethics, and respect of individuality and boundary maintenance. Pastoral care that is sensitive to these concerns will seek to effect change and transformation for both individuals and systems, with the goal of renewing and restoring the personal and the communal dimensions of life as discussed in Chapter 5. Here pastoral care would be primarily concerned with practicing a ministry that renews and restores healthy relationships in such a way that the building of the community of faith that nurtures and sustains all on their journey of faith and growth is made possible.

4. Develop a strong pastoral leadership to bring about change in gender relations and norms that regulate human interactions. This necessitates pastoral and theological education which are responsive to problems in gender relations. Pastoral leaders will need to be well-differentiated (both in the psychological and theological sense discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) for them to effect any change in the way gender norms and roles inflict pain and suffering on women, and by implication on men who lose their true self through embracing an ideology of 'male superiority' that makes men want to keep their privileged place in society. Here we will need to encourage pastoral leaders to be very



clear about the issues of gender roles and to develop a very clear perspective that does not promote in any way sexist attitudes and/or practices. Pastoral leaders will have to be persons who are able to take a positive stand regarding the dismantling of sexist structures that cripple women's well-being and impede their full participation. They will need to be supportive of the African feminist vision of life together, and to be more initiators, rather than reactors. Indeed, this strategy would require that theological education and pastoral training be clearly focused on the development of non-sexist attitudes, practices, and theological views. Candidates to the ministry and/or theological students will need to be challenged to engage in work of self-differentiation in relation to personal biases, cultural values, and church teachings that perpetuate women's suffering and distorted images of women and men. Pastoral leaders and theological students will be encouraged to develop a clear vision of wholeness, defining their own sense of self as inclusive of "the other sex."<sup>7</sup> They will be encouraged always to work at being a non-anxious presence in the face of gender issues, as well as taking care to remain directed in their commitment to promote gender equality and justice in the church and family.

5. Equip men and women to be able to denounce openly the evils of sexual and domestic violence, gender-based domination and subordination, and to address these practices openly in women's groups, men's groups, and youth groups. This is particularly significant because these groups are found in many African churches, and many women, men, and young people are very actively involved in them. These groups can be used as forums to spread and disseminate African feminist literature that calls for healing and

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<sup>7</sup> I prefer this expression rather than the usual "opposite sex." The latter implies tension and conflict, whereas the term "the other sex" suggests the gender "otherness" and "difference" of "the other."

transformation of gender relations. For example, the women's groups, men's groups, and youth groups in the United Methodist churches in Democratic Congo have good educational programs that can be tapped into to promote awareness of gender problems and show the church's concern to bring about change in these important aspects of human life in African settings.

6. Promote, through seminars and workshops, an awareness of how sociopolitical oppression and cultural oppression are essentially the same in their root causes--the domination of one group by another or of one person by another involves the same dynamics and processes of repression and violation of the dignity and worth of persons. For example, sexism as a structure of domination, creates conditions for the abuse of power just like racism and political ideology do. James Cone is right in pointing out that "racism, classism, sexism, and imperialism are interrelated and none can be correctly understood and eventually defeated without simultaneous attention to the others."<sup>8</sup> Sexism cannot be adequately redressed in isolation from other mechanisms and accounts of oppression and marginalization.

7. Provide, in pastoral care and in the church, a clear message that African men must change, too, for African women's lives to be improved. This entails a very intentional focus on the agenda of changing sexist gender norms in Christian families and in the church. The church must organize forums in which men will be made aware of issues raised by African women theologies for study and exploration as to how this is true with them personally, collectively, and how they see what is being said in the literature present in their own lives and communities where they live. The requirements for gender

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<sup>8</sup> James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 115.

justice naturally will occasion fear, pain, resentment, and hurt, if the needed change is to be fully realized. This would call for a pastoral care that is sensitive to men in transition as well. As male privilege is being redressed, the aftermath could be traumatic for both men and women. This trauma must be addressed with sensitivity and care.

Acknowledging the pain and need of African men for pastoral care in the process of change would be very helpful as people seek to make sense of their experience of change and want to embrace a new perspective and attitude. The problems African women theologians raise (abuse, domination, subordination, violence, etc.) do affect the health and well-being of men, women, children, and the community in which they all live. Paying attention to how they each respond to and deal with these issues would provide opportunities to enhance the health of all in the perichoretic community.

As far as the care of men is concerned, we need to ask the following questions: What difference is the women's movement making in the everyday life of men in their families, their friendships, and their churches? And what kind of pastoral care is emerging that best speaks to the current needs for change in both women and men? Clergy must be equipped to find ways to solicit conversations with men about the possible changes called for by African women's theology. With clergy being aware of the issues, as well as equipped and enlisted in the work of healing the wounds caused by gender injustice, there is the possibility for congregations to provide leadership and direction in the care of men and women as they all struggle to embody their shifting identities in the context of the faith community and the family.

8. Provide opportunities for change and expression of change through liturgical acts that call men to repentance for sexism and patriarchy in communities, churches, and

society, and invite signs of restitution, reconciliation, and mending of relationships between women and men through public recognition of wrongdoing and offering some kind of public service to the church or community. Involved in this would be the engagement of men and women in the struggle to fight patriarchy and empower families and churches to be places where right relationships are developed for the enhancement and growth of all. While it is true that women's liberation is something which only women can, and, will achieve for themselves, it is important to teach men some of the things they can *do* to contribute concretely to the increase of gender justice. I propose the following:

- Families need to teach both their male and female children to share domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, and other household work traditionally reserved for women.
- Adult males need to increase their share of unpaid work in the domestic sphere. They must share the caring responsibilities towards children and other dependents such as the elderly members of the extended family, etc.
- Fathers need to participate intentionally in the nurturing of their female children in the values and attitudes of self-affirmation and encourage them to seek self-fulfillment through educational and professional pursuits.
- Fathers need to participate intentionally in the nurturing of their male children in the values and attitudes of seeing themselves as equals to their female siblings and to embrace the view that their educational and professional goals are as important as those of their sisters and female cousins.

**-Men and boys need to embrace the image of women and girls as persons of worth and dignity, capable of acting, deciding, and thinking for themselves. This involves discarding the culturally and theologically defined negative images of women and girls as passive, docile, dependent, unable to act, decide, or think for themselves.**

**-Men and boys need to be equipped to refuse to participate in or contribute, through attitude and behavior, to social conditions and attitudes which promote the oppression of women and girls.**

**-Men who are in leadership positions in the church and society need to recognize publicly that African churches are largely supported by women. Therefore the public organization of the church must represent this reality. Men need to be willing to “phase out” so that competent women can participate fully.**

**-Men and women who lead corporate worship need to design worship experiences which contain liturgies that use inclusive images of God and humanity.**

**9. Address the socialization of women, men, and children by challenging the traditional socialization of men into positions of privilege and women and girls into secondary positions of marginalization. By examining gender socialization as a basis for sexism in the family, the church, and society, hopefully, pastoral care will serve a transformative, sustaining, and therapeutic role all at once. This examination must include a consideration of the interplay between gender construction, socialization, and cultural arrangements based on sex, etc. Since gender identity is quite firm by the time children are three years of age, it is important that pastoral care’s educational program to combat sexism begins quite early in the church. Indeed, pastoral care must include**

education as one of its main tasks—education about gender socialization, cultural construction of gender, the stress this process poses to both women and men to conform to what culture or religion prescribes as normative, and the underlying values that affect the health and well-being of women, children, and men in families and churches when accepted and practiced.

**10. Promote the differentiation of self for women, men, children, and clergy.**

Pastors and church leaders must be expected and aided to hold a clear commitment to the individual and the community, the person and the family in their work. They must maintain this balance, with a clear emphasis on the promotion of the individuality of women and girls and with its consequent outcome on supporting and encouraging girls' and women's pursuits of personal dreams for career, professional, and social achievements (within the context of healthy and caring relationships). From this perspective it has to be maintained that such intentional care for individual women is none other than the care for the community--the care of the society.<sup>9</sup>

**11. Help and support women in their journey of healing, change and transformation by organizing small groups in which they share experiences and help each other to embrace their "emerging identity" and "role" in the family, church, and society;** part of this strategy includes also helping men, through small group work, to deal with these changes in women and the implications of these changes in their own identity and life. Indeed, both women and men will need pastoral help and support in dealing with cultural change and all its ramifications.

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<sup>9</sup> See Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

12. Openly recognize (in worship settings, denominational Conferences, seminary classrooms, Christian education materials, etc.) the contribution of African women theologians to the church and to the theological enterprise. This requires the appreciation of how African women's theology has contributed not only to the academic theological enterprise, but also to sociocultural and political change. Even though African women's theology has not yet gained a privileged and central place in theological education in Africa, it can be said that the growing number of women and men who are studying African feminist theology and those who show interest in studying courses that teach critical perspectives on gender and religion, is a sign that things are changing. This needs to be encouraged and emulated.<sup>10</sup> Denise Ackermann has noted that feminist theology in general has had some impact on the "male academy" and that it is now common to hear references to the critical analyses and reconstructive work of feminist theologians.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to note that African women's theology is becoming a major force in the church and in the theological circles, even though it has not yet gained its rightful place in theological education. Recent significant discussions of African theology such as Emmanuel Martey's *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*<sup>12</sup> and Tinyiko Sam Maluleke's "Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,"<sup>13</sup> among others, have a section on

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<sup>10</sup> See Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins," 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>12</sup> Martey, *African Theology*, 74-75, 82-84.

<sup>13</sup> Maluleke, "Half a Century," 4-23.

**African feminist/womanist theologies (Maluleke), and a discussion of African women's theological anthropology and liberation christology (Martey). The church must support these efforts by valuing women's contribution to the theological task and the life of the church as a whole. One way of showing support to these efforts is to include works by African women theologians in theological libraries, and in courses in systematic theology, biblical studies, Christian ethics, and pastoral theology and care, among others. Pastors and preachers who have studied African women's theological literature also will need to quote them in their teaching and preaching.**

**13. Train pastors to work in community with a sense of accountability to the community they come from and/or serve. Accountability here involves being truly aware and committed to respond to the particularities of gender experiences represented in the community by "checking" with a small group constituted of women, men, and children as to how they relate, lead, and care in relation to these unique experiences. The community, here, must be constituted of women, men, and children (maybe teen-agers) who are aware of issues of relational oppression and gender conflict. Related to this is the need to design programs that intentionally focus on training women, men, and children to listen to each other's stories and experiences. The training should involve a careful examination of the church's teaching about women/girls and gender issues, with a focus on redressing and correcting distorted interpretations of the Bible and other important documents of the faith.**

**14. Promote theological reflection based on a healthy theological foundation. This may involve exploration of how pastors, church leaders, and lay persons may participate in the work of bringing about the needed theological change. One of the**



major contributions of African women's theology is in the area of our understanding of God: it calls us to consider new images of God that include both female and male paradigms. Since our understanding of God has a bearing on how we live and relate, African women theologians believe that when we consider new images of God we will begin to discover "new possibilities for men and women living together in relationship to one another and to God who created them, male and female."<sup>14</sup> African women have suggested that our understanding of God as triune is especially valuable in our efforts to change the way we relate together. Although this suggested aspect is not particularly well-developed in African women's theology, I have developed a trinitarian framework based on insights from African women's analysis and other trinitarian theologians, to provide us with a basis on which to ground our trinitarian perspective as a foundation upon which adequate human relationships are based. Indeed, I find the trinitarian understanding of the nature of God to be ethically compelling and socially relevant. This model of God provides a theological frame of reference by which the paths of church and society are to be judged. So, having said all this, let me suggest that in the education and training of pastors and church leaders there should be an emphasis on the Christian understanding of the triune God and the trinitarian modes of relating, with specific questions as to how this particular doctrine may inform not only our relationships in the church, family, and community, but also the practice of pastoral care.

Coupled with this is the church's teaching about humanity, or theological anthropology. Pastoral care should emphasize the importance of beginning to know ourselves relative to the life of the triune God. The relationship of equality and fellowship within God should provide us with models about how we relate. Moreover,

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<sup>14</sup> Kanyoro, "Challenge," 181.

the affirmation of God's presence and involvement with each person (woman, man, child), or more specifically, the affirmation that every human person is created in the likeness of God should be emphasized as a basis upon which the dignity and worth of women, men, and children are based. Since God's imprint is on every human being, it is necessary that we treat every human person with respect and dignity. A point related to this one is the teaching about the nature of the church. The image of the church as the Body of Christ should be strongly emphasized in the education of church leaders and pastors. This understanding of the church emphasizes the presence of the Spirit of God in the church and the Spirit's workings within each member of the body of Christ. Through baptism the Spirit confers on each member spiritual gifts to be shared in the body of Christ for the common good. Both men and women have these gifts and so are equally equipped to participate in the life of the church for the common good. Pastors and church leaders must be helped to appreciate and explore the depth of this image of the church and be able to orient other people, and themselves, toward love, justice, and freedom.

15. Promote and support efforts by African women Biblical scholars to encourage reading the Bible from the perspective of African women.<sup>15</sup> As Phiri puts it, churches must be willing to recognize that "the Bible was written by inspired men within a patriarchal culture."<sup>16</sup> Also of significant importance is the acknowledgment, with African women theologians, that the Bible has been interpreted, through the years, by male theologians who have tended to make women invisible or present them negatively.

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<sup>15</sup> See Phiri, "Doing Theology," 75; Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics."

<sup>16</sup> Phiri, "Doing Theology," 75.

Involved in this exercise is what African women characterize as the separation between Biblical culture, African culture, and the gospel.<sup>17</sup> While African women theologians recognize that African women find meaning and comfort in the central message of the Bible as revealed in Jesus Christ, they argue that for women to find justice and peace through Biblical texts "they first have to try and recover the women participants in those texts. Secondly, women need to read the scriptures side by side with the study of cultures, learning to recognize the boundaries between the two."<sup>18</sup> Coupled with this is for the churches to promote and support African women's theological resolve to work within church women's groups and ecumenical women's organizations and gatherings as forums through which to spread the theological teachings and research by African women on women's status in the church, family, and society. Bible studies and Bible study guides by African women must be encouraged not only in women's groups but also in men's groups and youth groups so as to give people another perspective on these important documents of their faith.

16. Develop family pastoral care and enrichment strategies. Here we need to develop methods of helping families based on the perichoretic understandings of personhood, relationship, and community discussed in Chapter 5. Since the family, in African contexts, is a social system of primary relationships from which individuals derive major sources of psychological, spiritual and social nurture, it is important that the church include in its ministerial priorities strategies for enriching marriages and families

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<sup>17</sup> Oduyoye, "Gospel and Cultures in Africa"; Kanyoro, "Cultural Hermeneutics;" Phiri, "Doing Theology," and others.

<sup>18</sup> Phiri, "Doing Theology," 75.

so they will be truly places where individuals are supported and encouraged to seek their personal development and growth unhindered. Pastoral care and counseling will have to include courses on gender relations and roles in relation to Christian ideals and cultural expectations of what it means to be a mature female or male person in the family and the church.

The church's marriage and family programs will need to have two main goals: (1) enhance and nurture healthy families, and (2) treat unhealthy families. Family enrichment programs will focus on helping families improve their "interdependent network of need-satisfying relationships, so that all will be freer to move toward wholeness."<sup>19</sup> These family enhancement programs should be geared toward responding to specific contextual issues in a particular congregation and/or community. In the context of the United Methodist Church in Democratic Congo, for example, there is no need to create new groups to fulfill the educational goals of making people aware of the issues in gender relations and helping families enhance their relationships and life together. Existing groups such as the Jeunesse Pour Christ (Youth for Christ), United Methodist Women's group called Kipendano, and the Hommes Méthodistes (United Methodist Men) already have educational programs of various sorts, dealing with a variety of topics of interest to the church in particular settings.<sup>20</sup> These groups can be used creatively to promote the awareness of gender issues and problems and to elicit support from their members. Something like "the campaign to combat sexism" would be

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<sup>19</sup> Clinebell, *Basic Types*, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Kipendano is a Swahili word which can be translated "of love." In reference to women's groups in the Congolese United Methodist Church, it means "women of love."

an interesting program designed for these various groups and adapted according to the specific experiences of women, men, and children in particular locations. The Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology and Religion could be consulted to provide training for leaders and teachers and also to provide guidance, through its regional chapters, of the issues specific to a particular geographical and 'cultural' context.<sup>21</sup> All these groups can also be used as channels and/or resources for providing pastoral care to women and men through education.

North American pastoral caregiver Howard Clinebell is very insistent on the importance for the church to have a well-defined family pastoral care and enrichment program. Some of his ideas can creatively be adapted to inspire and inform pastors and pastoral caregivers to promote and enhance family well-being in African settings. Among some of the important emphases of the programs he proposes, Clinebell notes the following: Designing strategies for strengthening families, developing a family ministry through the church's educational program, and focusing on family enrichment and counseling. The church's strategy for strengthening families would include the development of a network of caring and express its concerns through visitations to people who have a variety of needs. In this model, the network of caring is largely composed of

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<sup>21</sup> As pointed out in Chapter 2, there are about four to five chapters of the Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology and Religion: The West African chapter with headquarters in Ghana; the East African chapter with headquarters in Uganda; the Central African chapter with headquarters in Democratic Congo and Cameroon; and the Southern Africa chapter with headquarters in South Africa. There is also a Portuguese-speaking group in Angola and other Portuguese-speaking areas. For more details on these subdivisions of the Circle and for a listing of regional representatives, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ed., *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God: Proceedings of the Pan-African Conference of Concerned African Women Theologians* (Accra-North, Ghana: Published by Sam-Woode for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 1997), 184-85.

lay persons who are trained and led by a clergy person. The second dimension is the development of a family ministry through the church's educational program. Here the church may organize intergenerational classes and retreats for married couples, families, singles, widowed, and divorced persons in order to cultivate the family support bonds necessary for life together. And then there is the focus on enrichment and counseling. This is for helping individuals and families cope with developmental and accidental crises through enrichment experiences. For families that need more than group support and enrichment, pastors should be prepared to offer counseling to address their issues.

The second aspect of family pastoral care that Clinebell proposes is the creation of family growth groups. These groups are designed for mutual care and support and for the development of family potential. Three to five families meet on a regular basis for fellowship and support in the context of the church. Through these gatherings families are given an opportunity to change and grow by focusing on the development of family potential. "Family growth group, focusing more upon growth than upon problems, provides opportunities for families to increase their awareness of their unique strengths and resources and then to actualize these dormant capacities in family living."<sup>22</sup> This model could be incorporated, for example, in the existing structures of neighborhood gatherings (something like the historic Methodist/Wesleyan class meetings) in the present organization of a typical United Methodist congregation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Families would meet with trained individuals (or pastoral assistants) to increase their awareness of their strengths, and to encourage intentional mutual care and support "for the development of family potential."

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<sup>22</sup> Clinebell, *Basic Types*, 291.

Then there is a family education and nurture model. This model gathers four or five families at various phases of family life, and several single people, in "family clusters" for weekly meetings (for two and one-half hours) lasting ten weeks. According to Clinebell, the goals of family clusters include some of those already discussed above. Let me, therefore, highlight those that I find unique to this aspect of family pastoral care strategy: to provide a group wherein there is opportunity for families to model for each other aspects of their family systems in communication, decision-making, disciplining, interrelating, problem solving; to provide a joint experience between generations where adults can share their concerns regarding the meaning of life's experiences for them amidst a time of rapid social changes. Children can also deal existentially with their real world experiences, using the group as a place to check out their experiences amidst its support and value system; to help families discover and develop their strengths through increased loving, caring, joy, and creating.<sup>23</sup> In reference to children, Clinebell goes on to say that one of the important goals in all family education and parent training "should be to help parents raise children who are free from sexism."<sup>24</sup>

I see in the ideas suggested by Clinebell the possibilities for devising strategies for family pastoral care and enrichment that will help African families to nurture each other through the changes in gender relations, learn from each other, support each other, and enable one another to be channels and arenas through which individuals are encouraged to embody non-sexist values and practices. This is especially important in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 293.

the case of rearing children who embody non-sexist values. As I have pointed out in this chapter, gender identity develops very early in life, and the gendered patterns of relating are developed in the first five years or so of life. It is important, therefore, that children be given an opportunity early on to be in contact with families, other than their own, that exemplify non-sexist ways of relating. Such interactions, in the church context, may be contributive to their development of basic attitudes about gender differences that show their understanding of how little girls and boys, as well as women and men are all equal participants in families, in the church, and in society. Of course, parents must be willing to embody in their own persons the egalitarian values and be able to send very clear messages about this to their children if any lasting influence from these church programs is to ensue. Indeed, the church can be a catalyst of these changes by empowering families to nurture, challenge, and teach other non-sexist values under adequate pastoral guidance and support.

17. Teach pastors, church leaders, and lay persons about the importance of listening to women's stories. This should also be equally emphasized with regards to men's stories. We need to emphasize that it is important for us to listen to each other and validate one another's experience--especially the experience of women. In listening to each other we help others tell their stories. In the process of telling stories and listening, we will begin to unlearn the destructiveness, violence, and ways in which we diminish and destroy one another and ourselves. But we cannot unlearn our destructiveness unless we take the time to hear each other's stories, to know the particular pasts of people's hurts, griefs, joys, hopes, fears, as well as the sin for which they need to repent and the



grace they need to claim and celebrate.<sup>25</sup> Having pastors, church leaders, and lay people as allies of African women theologians, through their commitment to listen to women's stories, will definitely be a decisive step toward the goal of taking women's stories seriously and acknowledging their dignity as persons of sacred worth. Having a growing number of pastors, church leaders, and lay people who are committed to listening to women's stories will definitely encourage women to tell their stories. As Riet Bons-Storm suggests, "[in taking] women seriously as they fight to develop their personhood and their power to speak, the suffering of women qua women will be lessened."<sup>26</sup> In this process of telling stories and listening, the power structures of society and church will begin to change, and the new world will begin to be ushered in.

We need to note here that since listening and pastoral care and counseling belong together, pastors and pastoral caregivers who do not have an awareness of their own gender and cultural biases may not be able to listen pastorally and therapeutically to stories that tell of the suffering generated by oppressive gender norms. Pastors cannot provide gender-sensitive pastoral care without a transgender empathy and awareness.

18. Address the issue of women's silence. Pastors and church leaders informed by African women's theology must intentionally seek to include and give voice to women by consistently asking for women's perspectives in church Conferences, in the planning of important church events, and in the weekly planning of worship, among other things.

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<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, for some insights on the importance of listening that I have articulated here. Jones discusses the importance of listening in relation to the problem of forgiveness.

<sup>26</sup> Reit Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silence in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 12.

**Pastors and church leaders must embody African women's vision to change systems of privilege that silence and marginalize women. As Bons-Storm suggests, pastoral work "requires a great amount of courage to see what was invisible, and to hear what cannot be said."<sup>27</sup> Pastors, pastoral caregivers, and other church leaders need to be empowered to embody such courage and, therefore, be able to provide good leadership in this direction.**

**Most of the recommendations provided above can be viewed as emphasizing the following dimensions of the pastoral task. First, pastoral care must address the sin of prideful self-assertion that seeks to elevate oneself above others. In this case, the promotion of male primacy and privilege must be redressed unambiguously. Pastoral care must call African men and those in positions of power to an awareness of how maintaining an ideology of male 'superiority' diminishes African women and destroys their lives. Men, especially sexist men, need to learn that involvement in diminishing practices towards women also diminishes them. Second, pastoral care must address the sin of self-abnegation, common among African women, according to African women theologians. This would involve following African feminist injunctions for women to unlearn patterns of living and relating based on distorted images of women in culture and religion. Pastoral care must provide opportunities for African women who are afflicted by sexism to affirm their sense of self as a way toward healing and growth. It must promote an understanding that healing is self-actualizing. As Bowenian theory puts it, wounded persons can be guided to see that healing as "an act of taking responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny is not only the key to survival, but that very**

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<sup>27</sup> Bons-Storm, 39.

attitude creates the self that is a necessary resource for that end."<sup>28</sup> Third, pastoral care must enable self-asserting men and self-abnegating women to be able to hear one another and discover their true selves in communion with the triune God. Fourth, pastoral care must encourage and empower women who are afflicted by sexism, and marginalized others, to maintain hope even in the face of awesome forces of annihilation. This work would involve, for the pastoral caregiver and women who are afflicted by sexism, the struggle to hold on to the eschatological vision of a healed and reconciled community, while making efforts for a visible historical transformation. And finally, pastoral care must emphasize the formation and transformation of our lives through an ever-deepening friendship with the triune God. This would involve unlearning our deeply entrenched habits and practices of sin and learning to cultivate habits and practices that reflect our being in communion with the triune God, with one another, and with the whole creation.<sup>29</sup> This work should include the reconfiguration of gender relations in all the aspects of women's and men's functioning: interpersonal, socio-cultural, political, and religious spheres.

### Concluding Remarks

I have tried in this dissertation to listen to the voices of African women theologians, and I have let them speak of their experiences in church and family. While I have noted how African women's theology has touched me personally (see Chapter 4), I need to say that I do not claim to know African women's experience in a personal way.

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<sup>28</sup> Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 136, 140, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Again, I am indebted to Jones for some of these ideas. See his book *Embodying Forgiveness*.

**My identification with African women's experience is by way of analogy. Their experience of marginalization and being silenced by culture resonates with my own experience as an African and Black man in the North American context. So, it is possible that I have misunderstood and distorted some accounts of African women's experiences or stories through my analysis. If this is the case, I would like to be corrected. If this study proves otherwise, I would still appreciate ongoing conversations and dialogue to enrich and guide my future work.**

**My study of African women's theology has helped me to realize that African women's concerns are human concerns. It deals with issues that affect our common humanity and life together. African women's search for wholeness is certainly the search for the wholeness and well-being of all--women, men, children, church, society, and the whole of creation. Indeed, without the wholeness of African women, or any other marginalized persons, we all are not completely whole. I, as an African man, cannot live as a whole person when my African sisters are still struggling. I must join the struggle and participate in the efforts to make their hopes-- no! our hopes-- happen. Pastoral care that is faithful to its Christian calling must embody the functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, nurturing, liberating, and empowering<sup>30</sup> in our efforts to make our hopes become reality. This wholistic practice of pastoral care will enable women and men in the African context to recover their true selves in relation to the triune God, to one another, and the whole creation of God, thus leading us to the building of relationships**

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<sup>30</sup> **Lartey has added two new functions of pastoral care (namely, liberating and empowering), to the four classical functions (healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling) and Clinbell's fifth category of nurturing. See Lartey, *In Living Colour*, 35-42.**

without violence and diminution. I hope that this dissertation will make a modest contribution in this direction. Meanwhile, *a lotta continua*.<sup>31</sup>

### Areas for Further Research

This work has focused on what one may call “problem areas” in gender relations in African families and churches. Following African women’s theological analysis of gender relations, this dissertation has paid long overdue pastoral theological attention to the marginalized and subordinated status of women in African families, churches, and the larger society. This attention to gender problems has been a necessary focus, given the experiences of pain and suffering caused by gender injustice. The emphasis has been twofold. First, I have included gender as a category of pastoral theological reflection and practice in African pastoral theology, care, and counseling. Second, I have challenged dysfunctional patterns generated by oppressive and inhibiting cultural norms in the African context, by designing strategies for pastoral intervention and care.

However, this focus on “problem areas” in African gender relations does not capture the totality of gender dynamics in the African families, churches, and the larger society. Therefore, there is need to do further research that would uncover optimal and adaptive aspects of gender relations in these arenas. African women theologians have, for example, noted that there are what I may call “optimal traditions and values” in African cultures. Although these traditions and values are not fully explored and consistently discussed in African women’s theological discourses, they are, nevertheless, acknowledged and affirmed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for example, has indicated that

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<sup>31</sup> I borrow this expression from Miriam Makeba's well-known song about the struggle for independence and freedom in Mozambique, Angola, and apartheid South Africa in the 1980s.

while the Circle of African women theologians has engaged in research and sponsored educational events to “unveil the oppressive aspects of [African] culture[s],” the Circle is also concerned with “highlight[ing] their [i.e., African cultures’] empowering elements for appropriation.”<sup>32</sup> The empowering elements of culture, or “optimal traditions and values,” need to be studied to uncover relationship strengths and resources that can be used to confront “gender inequalities and problems” and to correct dysfunctional patterns and values that perpetuate unhealthy family and relationship functioning. Put another way, there are gender dynamics that are functional and healthy in African families, churches, and societies. Empirical research that identifies and uncovers these optimal gender dynamics needs to be done, paying attention to specific contexts, such as urban situations, rural settings, class, level of education, dual career couples, and the like. This empirical research could also focus on the impact of gender socialization on male-female relationships in marriage, family, and church.

Increasing our pastoral knowledge about what works in “well-functioning” families and churches can guide pastoral interventions and programs toward promoting family strengths and resources (within the culture) and facilitating successful adaptation to gender challenges posed by African women theologians and other African feminists and womanists.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, if we are to make long lasting impact in the area of gender

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<sup>32</sup> Oduyoye, “Gospel and Cultures in Africa,” 46.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the diversity of perspectives among African feminist and womanist scholars see, for example, Gertrude Mianda, “Féminisme Africain: divergences ou convergences des discours” (African feminism: Divergence or convergence of discourses), *Présence Africaine*, no. 155 (1995): 87-99; and Susan Arndt, “African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, (spring 2000): 709-26.

relations, we need to identify more fully African family strengths and resources, as well as healthy relationship patterns, and to design pastoral strategies of intervention to support them. Such an endeavor would also strengthen pastoral work with individuals, couples, families, and communities struggling with gender conflicts. The models of family systems theory used in this dissertation can be utilized to design empirical studies that assess a family's level of functioning on key systemic dimensions, and target specific aspects of these for pastoral support or change toward more optimal levels of relatedness and functioning.

In addition, there is also need to do research that explores the applicability of other schools of family systems theory to African situations. This dissertation has selected three orientations (namely, Bowen theory and therapy, contextual theory and therapy, and structural family theory and therapy) to study the applicability and/or relevance of a family systemic framework for pastoral practice that adequately addresses issues in African gender relations. African pastoral theological training and practice could also be enriched by the perspectives and knowledge gained from the study of other schools of family systems theory such as Ericksonian family therapy, focal family therapy, strategic family therapy, symbolic-experiential therapy, and the family psychoeducational treatment model, among others.<sup>34</sup> These systemic schools of thought and clinical practice could be compared and contrasted to each other and with certain aspects of African situations and culture, with the goal of developing and constructing new relationship assessment tools and pastoral strategies to inform new conceptualizations and orientations of African pastoral theology, care, and counseling.

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<sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion and study of these schools of family systems theory, and more, see Gurman and Kniskern, eds., *Handbook of Family Therapy*. Vol. 2.

Further, while this dissertation has focused on gender as category of pastoral theological reflection and practice, other categories of difference such as generation, race, class, ethnicity (or tribe) can also be used to engage in African pastoral theological reflections utilizing family systems concepts and assessment tools. For example, given recent ethnically-based wars and conflicts in Central Africa, there is an urgent need to place ethnicity and tribe at the center of African pastoral theological reflections, using key systemic dimensions and concepts together with the Christian theological tradition, to identify and assess the “relational bases” of problems in “ethnic relations,” and how to target these “problem areas” and design strategies for more optimal levels of relatedness across ethnic groups.

Finally, since African families, like families in other cultures, vary in their configurations and ways they approach various environmental challenges that require adaptation and change, there is need to orient research toward identifying and assessing prevalent family forms in contemporary Africa and how they affect and/or shape gender relations. Underlying this research would be the idea that in many instances gender norms and dynamics that may be viewed as dysfunctional and unhealthy in one African context may not be viewed as such in another African setting. Awareness of diverse family and relationship patterns would enable pastors and pastoral counselors to honor family diversity by tailoring their interventions to the unique concerns and needs of individuals and families.



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